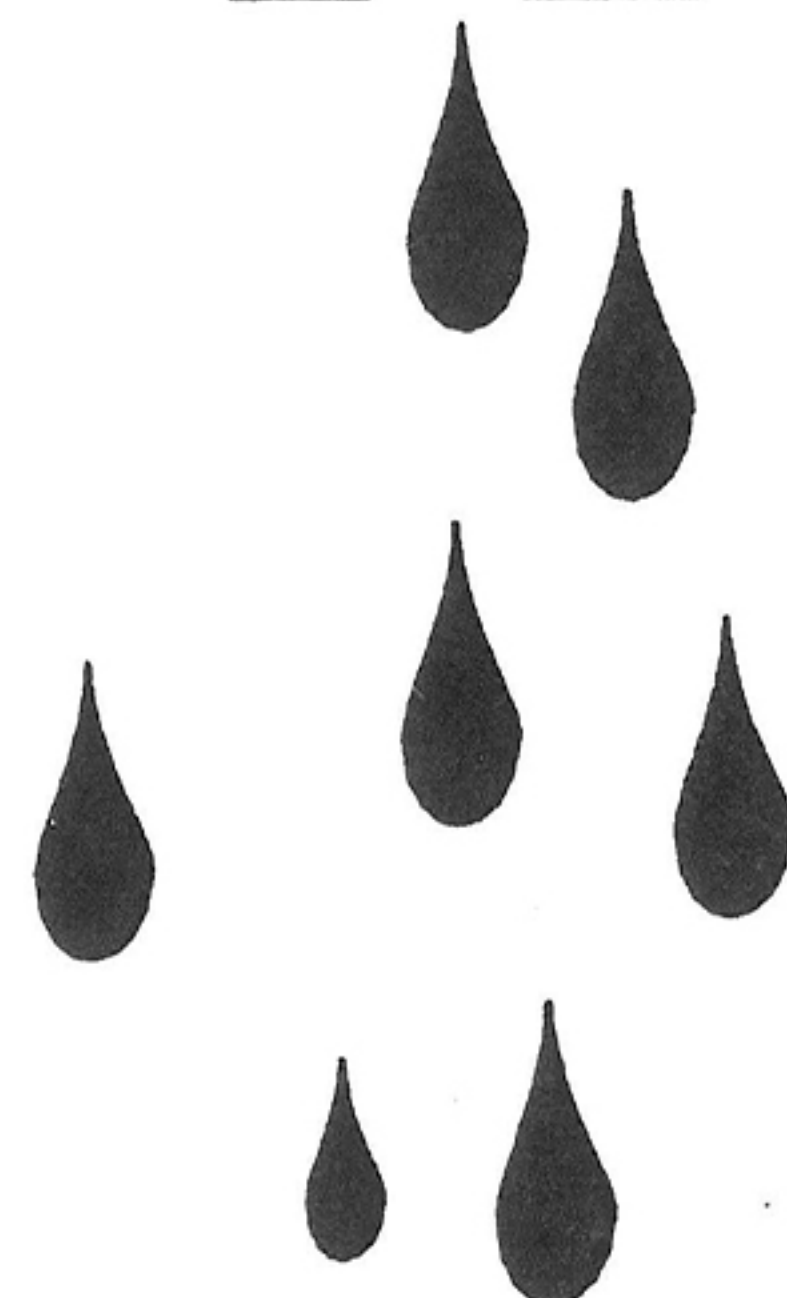
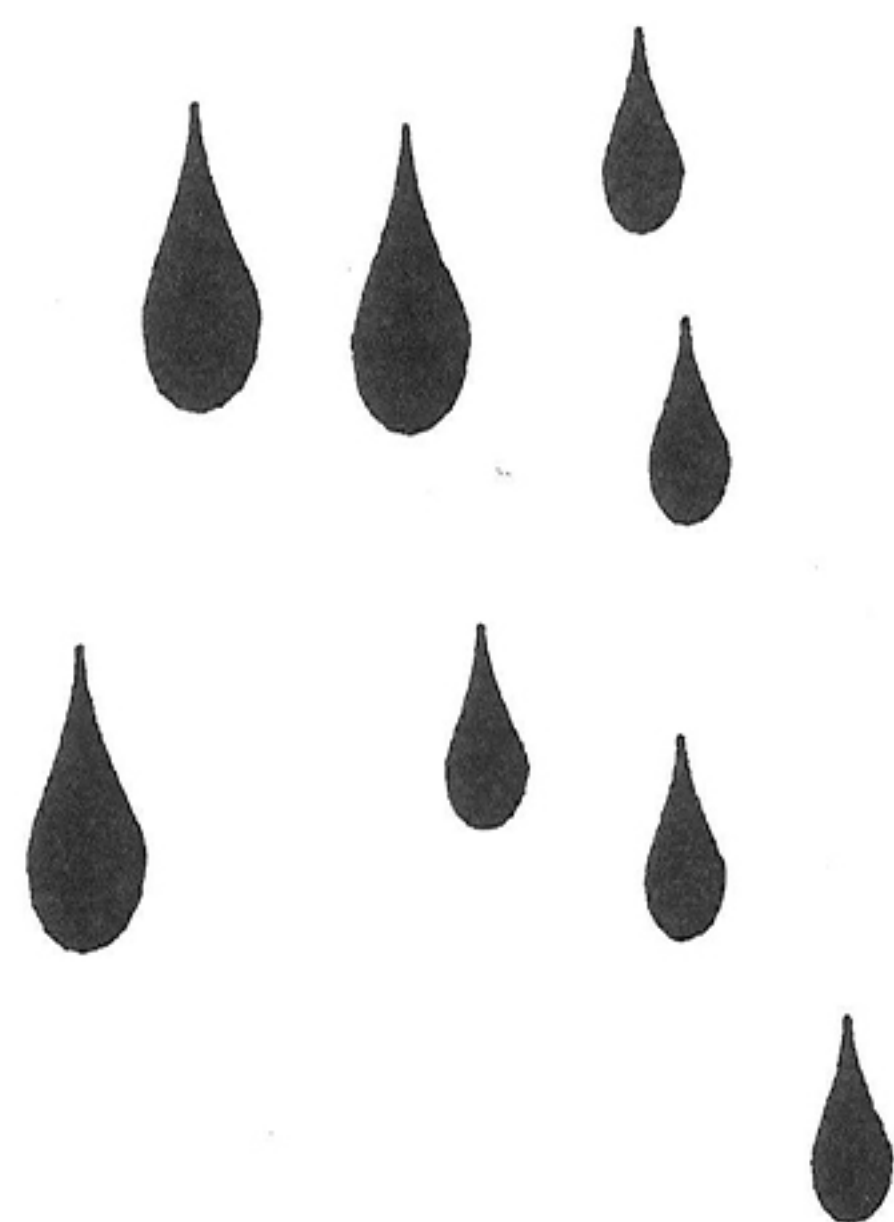


S A R A



s a r a



by  
*Francine Vale*



**SARA,sara**

**Sara Paul – Holocaust Survivor**

**Ernest Paul –Underground Fighter**

as told to

Francine Vale

World of Love Press LLC

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"The U.S.Holocaust Memorial Museum Library in Washington, D.C. has officially accepted "SARA,sara" to be available for researchers, scholars and educators. At the Library's request the author has donated her trove of supporting documents including interviews conducted with German youth who make annual 'restitution' visits to indigent Holocaust survivors in NYC, documentation of Sara's admittance to Sanitariums in Italy, letters to the author from the office of Elie Weisel, and many additional supporting documents. Permission has also been granted for 'the work' to be used by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum for Museum sponsored educational programs."

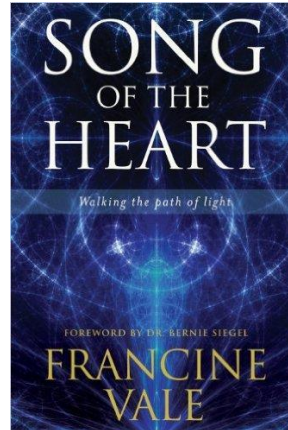
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## Other Books by Francine Vale

“Song of the Heart – Walking the Path of Light”



World of Love LLC

## Dedication

*SARA,sara* is dedicated to Sara's brothers Nuchem and Velvel, to the three little sisters of my Grandma, and to the 1,500,000 Jewish children who perished in the Shoah along with their mothers, or separated from their mothers, or right before the eyes of their mothers and other witnesses. May each of us find within ourselves the strength and dedication to help make this world safe for all children everywhere. *SARA,sara* is dedicated to the memory of suffering children the world over whose lives were lost to the brutal ravages of war. Let us remember the lessons of the Shoah and teach the lessons of the Shoah wherever we go: *Be kind to one another, do no harm to one another, and make of this world a place where all may walk in love and in peace.*

# Table of Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

## **[SARA,sara](#)**

[The Legacy of the Ba'al Shem Tov](#)

[Such Things Can Never Happen Here](#)

[Betrayal](#)

[The Door](#)

[Auschwitz](#)

[Stutthof](#)

[The Death March](#)

[Liberated](#)

[The Kibbutz](#)

## **[ERNEST](#)**

[Novoselo](#)

[Habonim](#)

## **[SARA & ERNEST](#)**

[Bride and Groom](#)

[Italy](#)

[Aliyah](#)

[Hope](#)

[In Sara's Own Words](#)

[In Ernest's Own Words](#)

[Sara](#)

[Photos](#)

## Author's Note

*The relentless reach of Germany's Third Reich as it sought to eliminate every Jewish citizen from Europe has been documented by historians and scholars as well as survivors of the Holocaust. This is Sara Paul's contribution to the historical record. Her testimony reveals the German determination to annihilate even Jewish children. Sara's experience describes the disconnectedness of a fragile child caught in the machinery of the Third Reich. Sara's awareness as it becomes shrouded in terror, finds refuge within an inner, safer dimension of her mind to emerge only when the deepest emotional wounds are being inflicted upon her. I have sought to preserve this quality of Sara's testimony, allowing her story to unfold almost ghost-like, remaining absent in places one might desire information, but honest in its portrayal of the effect of Nazi atrocity as it was wielded against the child victim.*



## Prologue

Sara. Stylish, attractive and poised, with a melodious voice and poetic manner of expression; veils of sorrow shroud Sara's dark eyes and obstruct the light of her soul. When you look into Sara's eyes you see damage, death and long, dark nights. Yet she moves through each day with grace and her smile is warm and sincere.

In the Spring of 1994 Sara and I were invited to the home of a mutual friend. For the ten years of our acquaintanceship we usually met this way, at various gatherings. This time it was a luncheon to celebrate the birth of our friend's new granddaughter. During the course of the afternoon the conversation turned to the subject of Sara's Holocaust memories and her desire to find someone to write her story.

Suddenly, I was alone in a moment of long ago. I remembered my grandma. She was a young grandma but her gentle grey eyes were etched with woe and sorrow. When I was four years old Grandma opened a bureau drawer and withdrew a faded sepia photograph, worn and crumbling around the edges.

"Come, Fagala, sit on Grandma's lap and see my family...what used to be...in Russia...here is my Mama and Papa, and here, my three sisters...the little one, see how she looks like you..." Grandma's voice trembled and in her voice mysterious resignation dwelled beside faraway longing. "All gone..." she whispered.

Out of respect I didn't turn to look at her face or even ask a single question. But I'd overheard snatches of conversation so I knew that my grandma's family, along with every other Jewish family in their town, had been murdered by someone called "Hitler." "Shot...Ravine...Forest..." I'd heard them say..."One man escaped and hid in the forest...he witnessed with his own eyes...he came to New York...it was in the Jewish newspaper so we know."

The summer I was sixteen I read the book *Exodus* by Leon Uris. A revelation to me, *Exodus* inspired a lifelong passion to learn about the Holocaust and to understand humanity's compulsion to define "others" for purposes of bias, hatred and destruction.

Many years passed; marriage, raising children, ongoing education at NYU and in 1984, our move from the suburbs to New York City. The morning of this gathering at my friend's home I'd heard from a publisher who'd read the manuscript of my first book *Song of the Heart*. She predicted the book would become a classic and she wanted to publish it. To become an author had been my dream but instead I had devoted all my energy to home and family. In 1978 I became my husband's partner in his expanding automobile dealerships and there I earned my reputation as a respected businesswoman. Now, surrounded by friends and goodwill, and encouraged by the publisher's fine critique, I felt fully qualified to write Sara's story.

"It's more than a writer you need," I suggested to Sara. "You will need someone with knowledge of the Holocaust, someone who will conduct interviews with empathy and compassion, mindful of your fragility. Sara, I'm the one to write your book."

Later we spoke privately and agreed to an interview schedule of weekly two-hour audio-taped sessions in a conference room at the business address of Sara and her husband, Ernest Paul.

While I became involved in the task of drawing out Sara's story and creating a cohesive narrative our progress was interrupted by events in my personal life: two serious surgeries, my mother's terminal illness, my daughter's wedding and the birth of my son's child who arrived ten weeks early and far from home. Meanwhile, the concentration camp victim's lament which years ago had lodged itself within my mind and heart urged me, after each emotional delay, to return to the project. "Those who survive owe it to those who perish: You must go on! Bear witness to the world! Never forget!"

On a Tuesday morning in late September, I arrived for our usual appointment to find Sara restless and upset. She had a pounding headache. In an anguished voice Sara related the cause of her distress.

Since the night of our very first interview in May an unexplained ever-present vision had entered Sara's mind. Sara had envisioned two young boys for whom she felt the tenderest love, and she felt they returned her love, but she was unable to identify them. Lying in bed – lamplight, radio and television switched on as usual to camouflage the night, a book on the bedside table, eyes open or closed – Sara was startled by the intensity of the vision and the insistent call of the two young boys.

"We want to be counted! Count us, too!"

Sara envisioned night: Auschwitz, SS, vicious black dogs, chaos, cattle cars, screams, smoke and ashes billowing into the terrible night sky. Sara is twelve years old. Near Sara, in front of the train, two handsome young boys; they wear caps and grey Eisenhower jackets and their trousers of fine cloth are wrinkled from the long journey.

After seeing this vision night after night for ten weeks two names flashed before Sara's eyes: Nuchem and Velvel. Who were these boys, Nuchem and Velvel? Why were they coming to Sara in these visions? Sara still didn't know the answers to these questions, yet she could think of nothing else, and the effort of trying to remember was disrupting her life and making her sick.

She had asked her husband, "Ernest, have you ever heard me mention the names Nuchem and Velvel?"

"Never," he said.

"You hear me in my sleep, you hear my nightmares. Maybe I cried out these names."

"Sara. I'm sure I've never heard you say those names."

Sara asked her children if they recalled having heard the names Nuchem and Velvel. They hadn't. She called her cousin, Sarah, in Florida.

"Sarah, I remember there were seven kids in your family. Did you have two brothers, Nuchem and Velvel?"

"Sara! You know those names! Don't you remember your brothers?"

"I had two brothers?"

"Yes! They went to concentration camp. Ask your cousin Hanah, your father's brother's daughter. As far as I remember you used to be very close and Hanah just got to Israel. Why don't you call her?"

So Sara dialed the telephone number of her cousin Hanah who was also a survivor of Auschwitz.

Hanah said, "You don't remember your brothers?"

"No, I don't remember." In her own ears Sara's voice was barely audible. "How

come no one ever told me I had two brothers? I don't remember them!"

Hanah tried to console her. "Sara, there is one woman left, much older than you. Rivka. She was your neighbor. She was in concentration camp with you and she was on the same cattle train with you also. Call her. She'll tell you about your brothers." Hanah gave Sara the woman Rivka's phone number.

Alone in her room in Tel Aviv Rivka's spirits lifted when she received the call from Sara. "Yes! Sarala! Of course you had two brothers! How could you forget your brothers?"

Gasping for breath and sobbing, Sara lamented, "I have two faces! I have two names!"

"Look," Rivka tried to comfort Sara, "maybe it's better you don't remember."

"But I have to know! I have such terrible pain! My children don't know they had uncles! And I always think I'm an only child!"

"Oh Sara," Rivka said, "your brothers were so handsome! And so smart! Nuchem could solve any problem!"

"Imagine!" Sara wailed in anguish, "I! who survived, never even lit a candle! never said Kaddish!"

Almost a year passed. It was summer again when Sara convinced Rivka to at last disclose the story of the deaths of Nuchem and Velvel.

Disembarking from the train at Auschwitz, Velvel stumbled and fell. An SS responded by striking heavy blows with the butt of his rifle to the child's legs and back. Rushing to his brother's aid, Nuchem's instinctive act of love and protection incited an even greater fury within the SS, who then, with increased savagery, beat Nuchem's frail body, a beating which failed, even in its unequivocal brutality, to satisfy the insatiable blood lust of the Nazi. With his heavy black leather boots he kicked the limp and beaten bodies of the children onto the railroad tracks. Sara, screaming wildly, ran toward her brothers. Grandmother Rivka's screams arose from a shattered heart, for her soul, unable to bear the agony of the scene, was already ascending, while slowly, inexorably, the train rolled and the hulking iron beast devoured the bodies of Nuchem and Velvel. Someone grabbed Sara and pushed her away from the train, into the maelstrom of human chaos. Sara's frantic, horrified screams withered within her heart, speech remained frozen, and shock preserved her sanity.

Sara's memory of her brothers did not survive the scene of their savage deaths. The brutality was so unacceptable to her soul that the interwoven lives of Sara and her brothers have abided since that time where God resides, somewhere, away from this Earth.

**SARA,sara**

## **The Legacy of the Ba'al Shem Tov**

In Krive, a village in the land of Slovakia, people awoke early on spring mornings as they had for hundreds of years of springtimes past, to the scent of cherry blossoms and apple trees, walnut and chestnut trees flowering in gardens and along cobbled streets. Children awoke from dreams of the forest where they would go to pluck big brown mushrooms, where blueberry, strawberry and raspberry bushes grew lush, and the forest stood only an hour's walk beyond the nearby Carpathian Mountains, wreathed in silent mists of dawn on the eastern border of Krive. The Tisoh River flowed through the valley in the center of town, reached on both sides by steppes, crossed here and there by small wooden bridges. The muted song of rushing mountain water rose in the still morning air to Upschitzer Street, which lay parallel to the Tisoh, one block nearer to sunrise.

Of all the town's inhabitants none greeted each day more fully aware of the perfect natural beauty which was their home, nor lived with more gratitude for the harmony of life here than those who resided on Upschitzer Street, the Jews...for nowhere else in all of Eastern Europe were Jews safer than here, in Slovakia.

In the year 1700, on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains, in Ukraine, was born Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name, who is said to have seen by the age of twelve the hidden mysteries of Torah, and who possessed the ability to incorporate this wisdom into his daily life in such a way as to inspire Jews to come and sit by him, observe his ways, hush in reverent silence as he imparted wisdom. It is said of the Ba'al Shem Tov that when he lifted his spoon for midday soup all those present observed in wonder, for he neither inclined toward the bowl nor spilled even a drop into his full beard of autumn gold. For the sharing of wisdom, for habits of cleanliness and piety, the Ba'al Shem Tov might have earned sufficient merit for his years. But his name continues to be revered for his great accomplishment of bringing renewed energy and vitality to Judaism; he encouraged rejoicing, celebration of the Lord's Kingdom in heaven and on Earth, and under his guidance Jews became newly awakened to the voice of God. For their absolute immersion in pietism these Jews came to be known as Hasidism.

The legacy of the Ba'al Shem Tov's inspired teaching passed on from his disciples to generations of descendants. His teachings travelled with them and as the decades passed Hasidic dynasties became established throughout all of Eastern Europe. Hasidism spread even to Slovakia, which on October 28, 1918, joined with Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia to establish the Czechoslovak Republic.

In the year 1930 there lived in Krive seven-hundred Jewish families, three-hundred descended from Hasidic dynasties begun by the Ba'al Shem Tov. On Upschitzer Street, Bella Kaufmanova, age twenty, a young woman of elegance and grace and rare blond beauty, wife of Shlomo, whom she'd loved forever, brought a daughter into the world and named her Sara.

According to custom Bella's grandparents presented to the newborn baby a pair of little earrings, beautifully set rubies encircled by white diamonds, and next door in

Grandmother Rivka's house, a crowd of relatives celebrated the occasion as the earrings were locked into the tiny lobes of Sara's ears. Eight grandparents and great-grandparents were in attendance from both sides of the family, as were the sisters of Bella and Shlomo, numerous aunts and uncles, cousins of every age. And Rivka, wisps of cropped russet hair escaping from under a favorite head-scarf tied in back, had been busy all week, roasting geese and chickens and baking sponge cake and apple strudel in anticipation of this joyful day. So, from the beginning of her life Sara was dearly loved. She'd been born into an exceedingly loving family, and to a mother who'd longed for a daughter, for Rivka had often confided in Bella, "Bella, my precious daughter, I pray that God will bless you with a daughter, just as He has blessed me with you."

Shlomo's ability as a cutter of large diamonds was sought after by diamond merchants in Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, wherever a special diamond required the skill of a master. One morning, while occupied with a brilliant blue-white diamond from which prisms of rainbow light dazzled the eye, a splinter pierced the second finger of Shlomo's right hand. A surgeon removed the splinter but microscopic particles of poison already swam in his bloodstream.

Shlomo's death felt to Bella like an earthquake; she felt her world had flattened. Sara was two years old.

No longer did the zest for life sparkle in Bella's eyes, nor lighten her step as she went about her daily routine. When she heard the sound of laughter Bella wondered, How can they laugh? How can there be happiness anywhere, with Shlomo gone? And the sound of laughter felt to Bella like a blow to her body or a slap across her face. Even the beauty of sunsets, or flowering vines that grew on the painted fences favored by the Jews of Krive, and which distinguished the Jewish houses, felt to Bella like an affront.

Bella often described to Sara the many lovable, clever and unique aspects of Shlomo's personality, his dark hair styled short and modern, his tall slim frame and striking features. Like a Greek sculpture, Bella said.

Hungry for every word about her father, Sara begged for even more description, "Compare him to someone I know."

And Bella would answer, "There is no one to compare... your father was the handsomest man in the whole wide world."

"What about Yossi Mayer, my uncle?" Sara prodded, basking in the warmth of her mother's memories.

"Oh yes, Yossi Mayer is a handsome man, but your father was so much more in every way, and so highly educated in Torah." And then, dreamily, Bella would describe even the soft voice of her beloved husband.

So Sara felt as if she knew her father even better than she knew her mother. To Sara, the father she'd lost lived on in her imagination as a vibrant man who glowed with life, while her mother remained cast in mystery, a sad and graceful beauty.

## Such Things Can Never Happen Here

On November 10, 1938 news from Germany of Kristalnacht, Night of the Broken Glass, shattered the dawn on Upschitzer Street. The previous evening when darkness had fallen hordes of Hitler's henchmen had stormed the streets of German cities and villages. Jews were attacked and beaten. Over thirty-thousand Jews were sent immediately to concentration camps. Seventy-six synagogues were set afire. Jewish-owned property was ransacked and walls were marred with frightening ugliness: black swastikas, SS death-heads, *JUDENRAUS*, (Jews Go).

In times past reports had reached Upschitzer Street of pogroms in Russia where cossacks on horseback, with the ferocity of wild beasts, had thundered into peaceful shtetls murdering Jews, wrecking and torching Jewish homes, raping and slashing Jewish daughters. The Jews of Krive were accustomed to worrying, but they said, Such things could never happen here.

Compelled by the news of Kristalnacht, and with deliberate urgency, Bella began to instruct Sara in the disciplined ways of housecleaning, and she even constructed a small stool which enabled Sara to wash dishes at the kitchen sink. Bella did not usually speak in Yiddish but on that day, the day after Kristalnacht, when the family gathered next door at Grandmother Rivka's, she did. "I'm teaching you to be able to survive, *mein kind*." Bella's large black eyes appeared to Sara like burning coals, and her mother's words seared into Sara's memory. "My child, you must remember, whatever I have taught you till now you'll be able to use to survive."

Nervous and frightened, the adults gathered around the scrubbed oak kitchen table. Sara observed the constant motion of hands clasping and unclasping. Furrows and creases in their faces caught Sara's attention.

"How do we know they won't come here?"

"Here? Czechoslovakia? Never!"

Exchange of anxious glances. More clasping of the hands. The conflict between faith in the democratic government of their country and terror of the destruction to which they saw themselves vulnerable weighted the atmosphere in Rivka's kitchen with a poisonous fume. The terrifying menace of alien German faces looming over Krive and searching every house for Jews— with boots! rifles! clubs! Never! Rivka's kitchen grew silent.

Great-grandmother Shaynya, as on every Sabbath, gathered the children who joined her now on the brocade horsehair sofa.

"Oh, look!" Shaynya exclaimed, determined not to deprive her twelve great-grandchildren of the game she played with them. "My pockets are so full! Would you look and see what's there?" And her pockets, as always, were stuffed with goodies: imported delicacies like dates, figs and peanuts. Laughing, the children crowded around Shaynya, reaching for her bulging pockets.

The moss-green sofa had been placed in this parlor when Shaynya's mother had been a bride, and the younger children sprawled cozily on the fine Persian carpet which had belonged to Shaynya's grandmother. The family was accustomed to living among the fine, though worn, furnishings acquired by previous generations and handed down

or bequeathed to newly married daughters and granddaughters.

Shaynya opened the *siddur*, the prayerbook, and prepared to translate from the Hebrew text as she read aloud. First, as she was accustomed to doing, her eyes lingered a moment on each child as in loving tones she reminded them of their roots, of how the cemetery held the remains of our ancestors going back six generations, of how many generations they were descended from Rabbi Ba'al Shem Tov, and the children felt loved and secure, surrounded by their family and all their history. After prayers she read a Bible story, engaging the children's attention with her animated voice and her talent for dramatic gestures.

"The world is like an orchestra," Shaynya taught, "we need the piano, the violins, the drums, we need every instrument. Just imagine how an orchestra would sound with no piano! No violins! So it is like that with people. We need everybody, all religions and all races, as instruments to make the music of life complete."

At school, when religious prayers were recited each morning by the gentile students, Sara merely bowed her head in silence, along with her fellow Jewish classmates, and felt no conflict.

Gentile families also counted their generations in Czechoslovakia and friendships among Jewish and gentile families were common. Each year Christians invited to their homes for Christmas Eve three generations of Jewish friends. And Czechoslovakia had elected to the presidency Eduard Benes, a Christian who as an orphaned child had been lovingly raised by a Jewish family. To the Jews this appeared to be a clear affirmation of Czechoslovakia's democratic principles.

In March of 1939 Germany invaded Czechoslovakia; President Benes fled to London where he set up a government-in-exile, and immediately, Hitler established a puppet government headed by Father Josef Tiso. The Treaty of Protection was signed which made Slovakia, in effect, a satellite of Germany, and a reign of terror was unleashed against the Jewish community. Wild mobs of previously law-abiding citizens wrecked and burned synagogues. Jewish cemeteries were desecrated. Jewish business were boycotted. Jews were dismissed from employment, rounded up in cafes and on public avenues, and deported to labor camps established in collaboration with the Slovak leadership.

In February of 1942 the Germans arrived in Krive and they delivered to City Hall their official request for lists naming the Jews of Krive. And the town administrators complied with astonishing accuracy.



## Betrayal

In March, a few weeks after their arrival in Krive, Nazi troops advance on Upschitzer Street, and the muted song of the Tisoh River vanishes in echoes of German boots marching to round up the Jews.

Sara wears several sweaters under her coat and scarves knitted by aunts and grandmothers. With trembling hands Bella fastens her camel-hair coat; the coat is trimmed with fur and she wears a Russian-style fur hat, matching fur muff and hand-made boots of dark brown felt. Tall, slim and blond, Bella is a strikingly beautiful woman. Sara, twelve years old, walks beside her mother and they hold hands, a dozen steps behind the Nazi escort, walking toward the train station.

Inside her coat pocket Sara's fingers close around the familiar crystal rock of salt, Sara's treasure, a memento from a second grade class trip to the salt mines outside Krive. With her classmates and teacher Sara had descended the carved salt steps to the unforgettable sight of a cavern of salt deep beneath the earth's surface. The grownups predicted that one day the whole town, including its airport where three airplanes landed daily, would, due to the extensive mining, collapse into the earth. Workers had carved into the crystal walls a sculpture of Jesus on the cross in detailed artistry, eyes painted on the salt. Pure and white, the cavern sparkled everywhere, and the cathedral-like ceiling caused Sara and her classmates to imagine they had arrived in Paradise. A whole city built within this huge mountain of salt and at least a hundred men labored there. While the children watched, the laborers carried chunks of salt packed in burlap bags toward the surface, and Sara's teacher explained that the mine was government-owned and that salt was an excellent product for exportation. That day each schoolchild had been given a small bit of salt to take home and ever since Sara had saved hers, a precious piece of crystal, a tiny chunk of Paradise, and this crystal she carried in her pocket, from her home.

Aunt Sara, Bella's older sister. Uncle Hanach. Their daughter. Their son Mishilem, who was a rabbi. Mishilem's wife. Their four sons and three daughters. Another married son, Moishim, and his wife. Their four sons and one daughter. Uncle Hanach teaches Hebrew school attended only by boys. But unofficially, at home, he teaches his nieces to read and to write Hebrew, as in Sara's family it is the custom for women to be educated. And Mishilem is orthodox. When Sara goes to his house she wears long sleeves and makes sure her knees are covered with high socks. Great-grandparents Chaindel and Kuppel, Bella's father's parents, and great-grandparents, Shaynya and Chainach, Bella's mother's parents. Great-grandfather Chainach was admired by all for his wonderful curly, blond hair, smooth, fair skin, and blue eyes which always seemed to reflect the sky.

Indelible in Sara's mind is an image of Chainach presiding over Seders. Majestic and regal, he wears a white robe and reclines on a high bench cushioned with a profusion of colorful pillows.

Sara catches a glimpse of little Esther, her cousin, walking. All the cousins: Sosi, David, Salas, Rosci, Bisczi, Toby, Hanah, Shlomo, Avraham, beautiful Hanya. Faster! Hurry! The Nazi guards shout and raise their truncheons. With exceeding thoroughness

they round up every Jewish family in Krive.

All around her Sara hears soft, muffled sobbing. Her own dark brown eyes glisten with bewildered, frightened tears and shine like two dark stars against her pale, oval face. Sara glances at Grandma Rivka and sees that her Grandma's deepset brown eyes are filled with silent fear and anguish, and Grandma is weeping, straining to keep the swift pace. In the crisp morning light Rivka's complexion is clear and unlined, but drained of all color. Grandma Rivka has never once scolded Sara, not even when Sara had taken Grandma's lovely embroidered silk bedjacket and had cut it apart to fashion for herself a little dress, and the cousins had warned, "You're gonna get it now!"

But Rivka, instead of scolding, had declared, "Oh! Look how talented you are! Sewing a beautiful dress!"

So Sara and her Grandma shared a wonderful bond, for Rivka possessed an uncommon talent for dressmaking. Although many women in Krive would have liked Rivka to sew for them, she fashioned dresses exclusively for her granddaughters, often working with velvet, her favorite fabric, and trimming the dresses with her own hand-crocheted collars, adding here and there a needlepointed flower. Except for buttons and ruffles and bows that Rivka occasionally felt inspired to add, Sara loved the dresses her grandmother sewed for her.

If Sara wanted to 'fix' a dress by removing a ruffle, or in any other way, Bella would never permit it. "Your grandmother went to the trouble of buying such beautiful material and then she sat for hours to make you a dress and this you want to change? No, Sara. Your grandmother made it and it's beautiful and you should love it because you're lucky to have a grandmother."

Everyone is weeping. Holding children's hands, clutching babies close, carrying bundles. Only 25 kilos permitted so they carry mostly food, hurrying to keep the brisk pace the soldiers set.

Gentile neighbors and friends emerge from doorways, line the streets, watch as the Jews are taken from Krive. What thoughts enter their minds at this incredible scene? Do they notice Grandma Rivka and Grandma Shaynya hurrying by? Do they notice their faces? Can they see the torment of fear in their eyes? These uncommonly beautiful women, tall and slender, their posture dignified, their backs erect. The neighbors referred admiringly to Shaynya as, "the Major." But not now, at least not aloud. Do the neighbors who line the streets notice Rivka's husband, tall and regal, striding past with long legs and leather boots, his yarmulke unseen although known by all to be in place under his Russian hat of fur, everything about him dark, including his olive complexion, except for eyes of startlingly clear blue and his clean white shirt? Sara, however, is close enough to see tears on her grandfather's face, running silently into his beard.

Perhaps the gentile neighbors' vision is not focused, after all, on compassion for this terrible ordeal the Jews are facing. They might be seeing, even now, before the footsteps of their Jewish friends and neighbors become an echo or an unmentionable memory, themselves, digging up the buried Jewish belongings. Whispered rumors, brought to synagogue by a Jew who escaped deportation had prompted many Jews, Bella among them, to gather their brass and silver possessions, their jewelry, and with the help of a trusted gentile neighbor, bury their valuables for safekeeping. Years later, after the war is over, survivors returning to reclaim possessions learn that even before the train carrying the Jews away from home had rounded the curve of the railroad

tracks, gentile neighbors had rushed to unearth the hidden valuables. Even before the cold March sun had given way to a wicked night there had been such a frenzy of looting and arguing and tearing from each other's hands as to mark the day well in the collective memory of Krive. Never before had they fought with such a fury as when they divided the possessions left behind by the Jews. Jewish goose feather pillows, Jewish coats, dresses, suits, and scarves, Jewish armoires and carpets spirited away to gentile houses. By sunrise of the next day families awoke in Jewish beds and breakfasted at Jewish tables. Every Jewish house had already been claimed by a Christian family. In less time than it takes the earth to complete a single day's rotation some people became so embittered toward their swifter neighbors for usurping coveted property as to cause rifts which prevailed for decades.

Sara sees Anna, her best friend, with whom she often shared a warm slice of bread spread with sweet, fresh butter provided by Aunt Sara. Aunt Sara, Shlomo's sister, owned a small dairy factory adjacent to the school and at morning recess she'd bring the treat to Sara. They'd sit close together on an old tree stump. "Eat, Sarala, eat," Aunt Sara had entreated. "What am I going to do with you, you eat like a little bird." Aunt Sara is staring straight ahead as she maintains the pace alongside Grandma Rivka. Several paces back and to the right Sara sees her great-grandfather, Rivka's father, walking with his usual dignified carriage, his blue eyes watering. Great-grandfather, with his own hands, had made a sled for Sara, and while Sara had watched him work he'd polished the runners with candle wax and soap, explaining patiently in his educated accent that this is how to insure a smooth ride down the mountain, always maintain clean and polished runners. Sara caught a glimpse of another great-grandfather, Shaynya's husband, who strode with a strong, military posture, his gaze fixed and steady. Sara remembered the dollhouse he'd made for her and the hours he'd sat by the fire on winter nights carving miniature beds and tables and chairs. The great-grandmothers had fashioned dolls for Sara, utilizing rags, old stockings and socks, painting on the mouth, and sewing on buttons for eyes.

On the corner, over there by the bakery, stand a group of classmates. Anna and Geiza gathered there, too. They wave and smile and clap their hands, and they call out, "Goodbye, Jews!" And the women who envied Bella's eternal beauty as well as her fur-trimmed camel hair coat, smirk, smile mean smiles, turn their backs as Bella passes.

Burning pain of betrayal shoots through Sara's heart. She's falling, helpless, into an abyss. No more home. No school. No friends. No one cares what happens to you even though yesterday they were in your kitchen eating strudel at your table just like always, what used to be always. Sara hurries. Faster! Faster! The soldiers keep shouting. The pain of betrayal burns in her heart and her face, like the faces of all her loved ones, is streaked with hot tears which cannot cease.

## The Door

On arrival at the station the seven-hundred Jewish families of Krive, by order of the Nazi commanders' compulsion for organization, arrange themselves in groups according to Hasidic dynasties, of which there are three: Vishnitzer, Belzer, Satmer. The dynasties are viewed by the families as religious organizations, each with their own synagogue in Krive. Sara's family is Vishnitzer.

The trains! Not regular passenger trains with seats for people to sit on – no! Cattle cars! Raus! German commands. Pushing people in. No room! The soldiers are pushing and shoving everyone! Forcing more people into the cattle cars. Packing people in so close to one another everyone remains upright. Suddenly, the ominous sound of doors sliding closed, and the entire Jewish population of Krive is sealed inside. The locomotive hauls its cargo of human sorrow toward Slovakia's southern border. Sara feels for her crystal of salt still safe in the pocket of her coat and listens while the grownups speculate, talking about a ghetto.

The Germans are taking us to a ghetto. We heard about ghettos in Poland where the Jews are forced to live in a walled-off section of Warsaw, apartments overcrowded with two or three families. We can do that if we have to. And then from the ghetto they'll make us work – forced labor – we can do that, too; the young will work and the old will look after the children. Weren't we slaves in Egypt? And still we survived. We'll survive again, til the war is over...

Not everyone agreed. In Sara's car a doctor shared with two dentists and a professor, all lifelong friends, his supply of cyanide pills. Many people raised their voices in protest, arguing that in Judaism suicide is forbidden. In addition, five elderly women died. The stench of the corpses pressed so close among them caused a great cry of suffering to rise up in the car, a cry of lament laden with pleas to God. The wailing, the voices, what's gonna happen? what's gonna happen? look...the corpses... And all sealed in a cattle car together.

The trip lasts two days. Two stops and two drinks of water. One bucket for people to relieve themselves.

In Matihskow, a small Hungarian town, police armed with machine guns await the arrival of the Jews from Krive. Now they are surrounded by barbed wire fences. The ghetto is a dismal muddy field enclosed by high fences of barbed wire. Tents erected on bare earthen ground. Police shove the families into the tents, crowding the tents beyond capacity. Parents remove their coats, lay them on the frozen earth for the children, everyone sobbing and wailing.

A kapo from the kitchen comes and stands at the opening of Sara's tent. "You want to eat? Everybody has to give all their food to the kitchen and we'll put it all together."

So the food supplies prepared at home, wrapped in bundles, carried through the streets of Krive to the station, the tortuous journey, are collected. In a week's time the food is gone. Hunger. Then stale bread and moldy potatoes are thrown to out-stretched arms.

March snow and freezing rain. The people are assembled for an announcement: Whoever wants to write a letter to family or friends should write it and the letters will be mailed. So Sara's cousin Zsaporá writes a letter to her husband whom she married just before the invasion. While paying for a newspaper Zsaporá's young husband had been seized by the Nazi police and sent to forced labor. In her letter Zsaporá pours out her heart, describing the terrible tribulations in Matiháskow. But in her innocence she has committed a grievous mistake for the letters are not mailed as promised. Instead, they are collected and brought to the desk of the German commander who chooses from among them seven letters and issues an order for the immediate hanging by the wrists of the seven letter-writers. Zsaporá is among the seven. Sara does not recognize the six others, surmising that they are from another town, and were brought onboard the train at one of the two stops on the journey to Matiháskow.

The Germans bind the victim's hands behind their backs and by the same tightly bound cord the seven victims are hung from the rough and hastily constructed gallows. The entire population of the ghetto has been summoned by order of the German commander to witness this scene. Truncheon-wielding soldiers patrol the huddled Jews to insure that all eyes remain on the victims, bowing of the head forbidden. Sara stands on the frozen barren ground of Matiháskow and Sara watches in wretched despair her cousin's suffering. All around snow is swirling, falling through a grey sky, and like tiny daggers the snowflakes strike Sara's complexion and her eyes sting. As soon as a victim passes out the soldiers – Hungarians! SS sympathizers! – revive them with buckets of ice-water, forcing them to remain awake for every moment of torture. Horrified, Sara sees a soldier splash water on her cousin Zsaporá. Zsaporá! and the suffering of seeing, of knowing, of helplessness, penetrates places inside her which no one will ever reach.

Beside the entryway to the tent Bella paces back and forth. What can we do! Oh my God in heaven, what can we do! Imagine! Hungarians! And SS surround us! We're in the clutches of demons! Bella clasps her hands and lifts them imploringly to the leaden sky and her tear-swollen eyes search the vast grey expanse for a sign of God. Then she goes inside the tent and reassures Sara that even though Sara is only twelve she can take care of herself, she knows how to survive, she's been taught well. And Bella is only thirty-two, young and strong, also capable of work, of being useful, important to the Germans. More than this cannot be articulated for awareness of their predicament is overwhelming. And in Sara's mind as she surveys the conditions around her one question repeats itself, What kind of an end will come from all of this? And as she looks into her mother's eyes Sara reminds herself, I will do as Mama says, I will survive.

Jenny, Sara's friend in the ghetto, says, "Don't worry, Sara, we're going to work and they're going to feed us...it's terrible here because we're not working and a war is on so naturally there's not enough supplies...they're feeding the soldiers, their own people."

"Yes, Jenny, we'll survive, and after the war we'll all go home." Sara's oval face is drained, but in her dark eyes, always serious, a precious flame of hope still flickers. Then she looks around at the rows of drab tents, at the people moving listlessly about, every soul lost in fearful thought and sorrow. "But look what they did to my cousin Zsaporá." Sara laments, haunted by the scene. Through the long night the women had

hung there, far into the next day, and one had frozen to death.

The two friends sat on the frozen ground of the Matihskow ghetto and imagined they were home, on Upschitzer Street. In Krive the houses were built of wood and stucco and Jewish houses were always painted white. Roses of every variety bloomed in their gardens, and walnut and apple trees flowered in their well-tended yards. On Fridays at sundown they welcomed the Sabbath in their warm, scrubbed homes while polished silver candlesticks gleamed on dining room tables, set with hand-embroidered linen cloths and fine china. But then a merciless wind arose, wrenching them back to Matihskow.

Jenny wished she could sweep away the foreboding doom which penetrated every thought and word since they'd been taken from their homes. "Thank God the doctor fixed her arms. You'll see, Sara, Zsapor will heal...she'll heal, Sara, she'll heal."

They were freezing, starving and already many were sick and some dying. People walked around like zombies, they'd ceased crying and wailing; they no longer speculated about the future. It's like being dead, Sara thought. You don't feel anything. Now the soldiers are pulling the beards of old Jewish grandfathers. They're beating them with clubs and it's not even touching me. Oh, God! Dear God! Help me! I don't want to lose myself!

Once again, Sara found herself reliving in her mind the early morning march through the streets of Krive. The awful memory of betrayal had already become indelibly engraved in Sara's mind. Anna and Geiza, her friends! standing on the familiar corner in front of the bakery, watching alongside other Christian citizens of Krive, the sobbing procession of whole families – Jewish neighbors, Jewish classmates – herded away by armed German soldiers. Sounds echoed within Sara: taunting voices, clapping of gloved hands, gleeful shouts, "Goodbye, Jews!" Mean shouts arisen from what source? The abyss which had engulfed Sara when these events first transpired now took form and shape around her and Sara was trapped inside a long black tunnel.

Here, everybody's praying. Morning prayers. Evening prayers. Somehow we'll be saved, something will happen to save us. Soon we'll be working, they'll feed us and we'll survive. The war will end and we'll go home. Gentle thoughts of gentle people. And Sara knew the answer to the question that nobody asked aloud: Who? Who among the human race cares? Who cares about us? Who cares about our suffering? No one cares. No one.

And everything was made worse, for Bella had developed a terrible toothache. Bella did not speak of the pain, she only held her hands to her face and remained seated on the frozen earthen floor of the tent. Rocking, rocking, like so many others were rocking.

Limited rations were now being distributed but only to those strong enough to wait for hours on line. Sara went to collect the rations and while she was gone Bella worried every minute, her pretty daughter going before the eyes of the soldiers. But all Bella could do was rock. Sara collected some cornmeal and water, a very meager portion, for the soldiers distributed rations only for the individual who stood before them. To the soldiers, those too ill or too old to stand on line no longer deserved even water. To the soldiers they no longer existed.

"I'm not hungry," Bella insisted, "really, I'm not...you eat, Sara, you eat."

In the ghetto physical discomforts were not discussed. Previously unimaginable

emotional pain, caused by terror of the unknown, as well as the known, overwhelmed all else.

Transports out of Matihskow had already begun, destination unknown. The German soldiers said the Jews would have to work, they were needed to help the war effort. However, one afternoon Sara overheard a conversation which took place only a few steps away from where she had gone in search of some momentary respite. A Hungarian soldier and a beautiful Jewish girl were walking together and the soldier was describing places called concentration camps where Jews were being killed by Germans. The girl ran from the soldier's presence and repeated this information to others, but it was dismissed as too unbelievable, beyond comprehension, the very idea alien to everything known to the civilized world. So they grasped at fragments of hope; however fragile, hope akin to prayer, was familiar: This place is so bad, wherever they take us has to be better.

But soon the frequency of reports increased, for the Hungarian soldiers discovered a perverse enjoyment in adding to the agony of their prisoners. They spoke of Auschwitz and of Birkenau, of crematoria where Jews were burned alive. For what are you saving this? the soldiers taunted the Jews. This watch...this locket...earrings...money...you may as well leave it with us because where you're going you won't need it, they'll take it from you anyhow and you're all gonna die.

Orders had been received to empty the Matihskow ghetto. The transports were leaving and everyone hoped to be among the last, praying America would rescue them, hoping President Roosevelt would hear their desperate prayers. Numerous transactions took place. Payments to guards of gold wedding bands and silver candlesticks bought time, although each transaction was accompanied by threat of a beating, the guards suspecting other valuables withheld. Thus, people were occupied with the cruel politics of the ghetto, the desperate finagling to survive one more day.

Their dignity already compromised with their expulsion from home, the humiliation worsened for the Jews as they marched before their neighbors. Family homes, family heirlooms, prayer books inscribed with the names of great-grandparents. Three handsome synagogues. Everything gone. The vibrant cultural roots of seven-hundred Jewish families replaced with emptiness, and the ghetto was an enormous monster which devoured even emptiness.

The amazing thing was that so many people, in the face of all they had endured, maintained the highest standards of family unity and morality. Sara's family organized. Each day on a rotation basis one adult divided his or her rations among the children. Even if a few of us could stay longer, they agreed, we won't allow the family to become divided...if one goes, we all go.

Sara looked around at her loved ones and felt her heart constrict in agony; she felt the heavy burden of powerlessness and hunger! Terrible hunger! Her mother was still in pain, but even a toothache, in addition to their wretchedness, could not diminish the beauty of Bella's features. Bella rocked, back and forth, back and forth along with the others. Sara worried, By the time we get to that place where we have to work nobody will be able to work...then what? But still hope lingered, even inside that long black tunnel: My mother is young, she'll survive...my grandparents are all healthy, they'll survive, too. Maybe there's something I can do, I just haven't thought of it yet; maybe I'm just not smart enough.

There was a man in the ghetto, an alcoholic, who had brought with him a bottle of vodka. Sara recalled hearing great-grandmother Chandel describe how whenever she had a toothache she rubbed a little vodka on her gums, and this memory inspired Sara to approach the man and beg for vodka. When she entered the tent she saw him immediately, sitting in a far corner, his head back, vodka bottle tilted at a steep angle.

Across the tent which was jammed with people, Sara screamed, "Please! Don't drink the last drop! Give a little to me!" and she had to be careful as she made her way across the tent, not to step on anyone.

The man looked up at Sara. "You're just a child! You're drinking?"

"No! No! My mother has a toothache! Please! Please! Give me the bottle!"

The man hesitated while he studied Sara and he replied, "Well, what am I going to get in return?"

"I'll give you today's rations, whatever they give."

So the bargain was made. Sara brought to her mother the last drops of vodka. Bella took it and held the precious drops on her toothache until the last remaining rays of winter sun had faded in the somber grey sky. Then she said, "Oh, don't you know, it really helped!"

Sara didn't believe it helped, for Bella's face was still very swollen and in her mother's eyes Sara saw helplessness, the look of futility that says, finally, there is no hope. So Sara knew the tragedy of the Matihalkow ghetto. And she recalled the only time her mother had spoken to her in Yiddish. "*Mein kind*, my child, remember what I have told you, you are a survivor, you will survive."

The Door. That's how Sara came to think of their six weeks in the ghetto. The door to the rest of it. The door already opening.

Methodically, the Germans removed the Jews of Krive from the Matihalkow ghetto. Two weeks after arrival the transports were leaving on a weekly schedule.

The elders in Sara's family spoke in Yiddish. "*B'sher*," they said. "Whatever is meant to be will be. Whenever the time comes for us to go, we'll go...we'll leave it up to God."

So they did not speak to the guards nor try to bribe them. They were taken away, still together, in the sixth week, the final transport to leave, and the ghetto lay vacant, emptiness lingering among the tents. Silence prevailed. Again, the soldiers shoved the Jews into cattle cars. Again, the soldiers aimed their rifles, threatening to fire into the crowd. Sara had never seen a train with as many cars as this one; a train that seemed to begin and end in infinity. The train was jammed with Jews from the ghettos, and the cries which arose filled the desolate field behind them with grief.

Again, Sara listened while the grownups talked. They knew what awaited them, but still, they refused to believe. The Germans are running out of ammunition...they need us...so even if it's so uncomfortable in the train whoever survives will work there has to be an end in it. Even Sara was thinking, Now that the weather is getting warmer, they're taking us to another place, a camp, like the ghetto, and everyone will have a job. And reaching absently into her pocket Sara clutched the salt crystal.

Although the swelling had finally diminished, Bella still held a hand to her face and Sara, sitting close by her mother, inquired, How are you feeling, Mama? Each time Sara asked, Bella tried to reassure her, Oh! A lot better! And Bella was busy tending to her mother who had fallen ill, and to her grandparents who had grown weak. They



huddled together in a corner of the cattle car, all of Sara's eight grandparents and great-grandparents, consumed with despair, longing for home, overwhelmed with concern for the welfare of the others.

The train made one stop each day. As the doors were unlocked and pulled open, allowing a shower of sunlight and fresh air to fall upon the Jews trapped inside, the German Red Cross workers quickly deposited supplies of bread and water at the very edges of the door openings. In each car one or two captives pulled in the supplies and a moment later the train once again was efficiently sealed shut. The German Red Cross workers preferred not to look at the Jews, untidy recipients of their charity, but when the iron wheels began to roll and the conductor pulled his whistle cord they stood on the platform and watched. They watched until the tracks were empty.

The soldiers said they were going to camps where the old and the children would stay while everyone else would work. The Jews crammed inside the cattle cars knew the gentile philosophy which stated that because Jews were business people forcing them to do physical labor was good punishment, so they accepted the story of labor camps. To Sara it was clear that everyone feared being murdered, for when they received the first distribution of food they said to each other, See...I told you they're not going to kill us.

On the second day three elderly people fainted and never regained consciousness. By the fourth day the putrid stench of death and sickness had entered the lungs of everyone who still breathed. The stench of death clung to their hair, clothing and skin, and filled their nostrils, causing some to lose their sense of smell altogether.

On the fifth night Sara dreamed. She dreamed of finding brown, velvety mushrooms where they grew in secret places on the forest floor, and in her dreams she inhaled the splendid forest aroma of moss, pine and leafy bowers. She heard the crackling of twigs underfoot and bird songs above in the trees. She dreamed of picking blueberries and raspberries and laughing with her cousins, her basket overflowing with sapphire and ruby colored berries. Sara tasted their juicy sweetness. She dreamed of walnuts and strudel, boiling the leaves of the walnut tree and rinsing her hair with walnut-water which made it lustrous and fragrant. Those were the last of Sara's dreams. Afterward, only nightmares.

## Auschwitz

On the sixth day they arrive in Auschwitz. Trains, high gates, fire, confusion. People screaming, crying, searching in the mayhem for loved ones, stumbling, lost – already lost.

Dazed, with dead eyes and shaved heads, captives wandered – this must be an asylum – look how the tall ones wear those striped rags too short and the short ones wear them too long.

Drawing near to the new arrivals, men dressed in the striped uniforms hurriedly explain, We're concentration camp people, from Poland, we're here a long time...every young woman who has a baby give it to an older woman, then you're gonna survive...pinch your cheeks to make yourselves look healthier, and walk straight. Somehow these inmates know which ghetto the new arrivals are from and their advice is given speedily and in low voices spoken in the Czechoslovak languages as well as Yiddish. Try to be on the right if you can, not on the left.

Here – a few yards distant from the train – SS. Hitting everyone, kicking everyone. Shouting orders. Mothers! Give your babies to the old ones! Some mothers hold nursing infants. Some have no one they know well enough to hand their child over to. And some just refuse to let go of their babies. A young mother, blue eyes and long blond hair – an SS shouts, Give me the baby! She clutches her baby even closer to her bosom, so tightly the child starts to cry. No shoes or socks, the little legs are kicking.

Horried, Sara sees the SS grab the baby's little feet – with his black polished leather boot he kicks the young mother – and without rage, but with great zeal and lust for blood and torture, and with a force delivered from hell – the SS officer beats the baby against a telephone pole – until the tiny body splits open. The mother – Sara is right beside the mother – screaming, screaming, until she faints. The vicious black boot of the officer – Sara sees it right in front of her! – kicking the mother again. A dump truck pulls up – he tosses what remains of the child onto the truck. Other SS are tearing babies from mother's arms – and throwing the babies onto the truck. The mothers go crazy – clawing their hair, ripping their clothes, screaming, screaming. Soldiers, smiling sadistically, use bayonets to stab the hysterical mothers as dogs tear them apart. Pistol shots silence the screams.

Here is Sara – seeing, hearing, unable to believe. Sara, Bella, grandparents – and Dr. Mengele flanked by SS. The horror, related in frantic whispers in the ghetto, whispers they believed and refused to believe – this is it, and still, who could believe? Elders clutching the hands of children go to the left – the young, healthy ones are sent to the right. Sara is standing at Mengele's table, her russet hair flowing long in lustrous waves, somehow she doesn't faint. How old are you? Mengele asks. Usually he points: right, left, right, left. Sara cannot speak; she knows because the Polish ones told her, she must answer sixteen, but she knows she cannot pass for sixteen, her body is still undeveloped. Mengele lifts his hand – Forget how old you are, you'll be a messenger – and with a spare motion of the wrist so as not to waste energy he indicates the way to the right. From the entire train he chooses nine children to be messengers. And the train

has yielded three sets of twins who are ordered to stand aside. Bella and two other women Mengele picks to join a small group of very beautiful women. Sara sees all her grandparents going off to the left, and they're holding all the younger cousins. Sara looks over to where her mother is standing. We're both on the right – my mother is safe. And the old ones and the children have gone to the left. And the truck filled with babies pulls away. And concentration camp people with dead haunted faces, striped pajamas covering their wasted bodies, moving as if they're still alive, carry off the babies' silenced mothers.

Us – the ones on the right – they take to 'C' Lager – we're ordered to undress – remove our clothing in each other's presence – we are modest and feel embarrassed to appear naked like this – we're sprayed with disinfectant – they spray our faces – and the disinfectant gets into our eyes – they enjoy their jobs – our heads are shaved – everyone's hair falls in dreadful whispers onto huge piles of hair shaved from those whose turn came before ours – only the messengers are not shaved so Sara gets to keep her hair. Emerging from the showers – no towels – we are unrecognizable to each other – and there follows a frantic calling of names – Helen! where are you? Rachel! I'm here! Where? In the insanity of the moment some laugh like lunatics. Female guards inspect vaginas for hidden valuables – degradation for the ladies – and Sara doesn't understand what they're doing. Gold earrings set with five small rubies encircling a tiny diamond, gift from the great-grandparents upon the joyous occasion of her birth, locked into Sara's earlobes according to custom – ripped out by SS. Absurd striped dresses and wooden clogs are issued without regard to size. Out of habit Sara feels for her precious salt crystal but, of course, it is gone. Left forearms branded with numbers – end of the world!

In one grotesque hour the final transport of the Jews of Krive, gentle descendants of Hasidic dynasties inspired by the Ba'al Shem Tov, have been processed at Auschwitz. Most have gone straight to the gas chambers and already the ovens are filled with their ashes, the sky above obliterated by the black smoke sent up from thousands of burning bodies. The few who survive this hell will suffer an existence of living death, unaware of the rising or even the setting of a blackened sun.

A group of camp prisoners break stones; on the peak of a broken-stone mountain stands a woman in bright costume, hair frazzled past her shoulders, singing magnificent opera. Sara learns the woman is a Prima Donna from Milano-Scala. For their entertainment the SS have allowed her to live and keep her hair. As they pass the broken-stone mountain the SS, in mock laughter shout, "Sing! Sing!" and toss bread to her, and for every crust the Prima Donna sings. Her face is bathed in tears and her arias echo across the camp. She's lucky, someone remarks when they hear her beautiful voice, she got a piece of bread again.

Block C-32. Near the bathroom and the disinfectant room. Four tiers of sleeping planks, each plank about eight feet wide, eight women assigned to each plank. Pushed in, no room to move without disturbing your neighbor. If one needs to go to the bathroom everyone on the plank has to slide out, and the one causing the discomfort is pinched and kicked by the others, and the kapo doesn't like the disturbance at all. Sara winds up on the end, suddenly isolated from everyone she knows. Five or six kapos preside. If someone is heard speaking, or even dares to scream, a kapo comes to beat her on the head with a wooden clog.

In an empty voice a kapo addresses Sara: "You know why you're alive? You're going to be a messenger. When I need to make an even row of 'pieces' I'm going to send you to collect them from different blocks." In this hell, the prisoners, who despite unprecedented tortures still pray to a God of mercy, are referred to as 'pieces.' "If I need four or five pieces you're gonna be the one who's gonna bring 'em." And she gives Sara a fancy little dress to wear. The dress was buttercup yellow and it was trimmed with ruffles at the neck and wrists. A wide satin sash wrapped the waist and tied into a bow in back.

The first day no one worked. Everyone lay on the planks, on top of each other, some dying, some just losing themselves, going crazy. Then the SS arrived, ordered everyone to line up and selections were made for various work assignments, work in the kitchen luckiest, or in sorting rooms filled with heaps of spectacles, shoes, wedding bands, all the varied belongings collected from those who'd been sent by a lift of Mengele's finger to the gas chambers – to feed with their mortal bodies the killing machine of Auschwitz. Like an obedient dog Sara is made to sit beneath the steps behind the door to the room belonging to the head kapo, ready to run as soon as the kapo signals.

At night Sara remembers the babies, the mothers, the truck, her family, all the little cousins who were sent to the left, ashes, Mengele, her mother – where was her mother? During the day Sara is busy. The task of survival in Auschwitz requires rigorous attention.

Roll call begins – 3 a.m. – lasts for hours, way past dawn. Prisoners form rows of five to facilitate counting – forbidden to move. SS, carrying long canes, come to inspect and count. Pale or sick-looking prisoners, the cane points – left – SS never say gas chamber. They move along the rows, sometimes choosing twenty or thirty pieces for the left, depending on their mood.

Imagine: a mother stands with four daughters. A cane points to one daughter. Please! the mother cries and pleads, Take me instead! The SS ignore her. Next morning the mother is seen, her back against the electrified fence. Every day and every night so many, against the fence. Even during the counting some run to the fence. The SS laugh and save their bullets.

One day, Magda, the block commander, takes Sara out of the barracks and leads her to the crematoria. "Look up there," she points. From five chimneys rainbow colors are shimmering in the flames. "You see all those rainbow colors?" Magda says. "Those are the colors of adults. When those colors change to green-blue then it's children in the ovens. When did you arrive? Last week? That's your family. All gone to ashes."

Sara's eyes are fixed on the flames. Mixed into the orange flames can be seen the color of blood. Sara is mute.

Magda is unrelenting. "First they gave them a gas shower. Then they put them in the oven. And they were lucky if the gas got them and they died right away. If not, they put them in the ovens anyhow. And many corpses move. Then they go through the ashes and look for gold fillings from the teeth. So this is where your family is." And then Magda gives Sara's face a hard smack.

Roll call. Counting by fives, hundreds, thousands. Selections. Standing exposed to bitter wind in threadbare pajamas while minutes and hours tick by. Hunger claws at

the belly, and thirst is like gravel on the tongue. With their backs against the electrified fence, frozen corpses sit, staring, dead. See? You don't have to suffer anymore...come sit by us. Sara can hear them coaxing. Just run to the fence like we have done. And Sara thinks, Why should I be here? For what? Enough is enough. Tomorrow I'll do it. Tomorrow.

A Nazi officer points his long cane – to Sara. Sara steps to the side along with some others – the end, crematoria – surrounded by SS accompanied by snarling dogs, too late for the fence. In the face of death Sara feels numb, remembering babies tossed on a truck, her cousins who went to the left, her mother somewhere, never seen, or maybe up the chimney by now.

March to the crematoria. Two doors: one for those selected for immediate death, one for workers. The soldiers lead Sara's group through the door which leads to death. The women are praying: Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu...Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God... Sara however, is mute. Now, the SS are leading them out. The women, confused, look at each other. Maybe this one is broken and now we go to another one. The SS are leading them on an alternate route back to camp.

Suddenly, three SS and their dogs come into view. People are digging. Sara, with the group of women led by the soldiers, passes near. The people digging are all women. Naked women. And they are digging. Sara looks at their faces – and recognizes – her mother's face! her mother's eyes are dead! her mother is naked! and like the others her mother is digging! Bella looks up and sees her daughter. Sara's mouth opens. She wants to scream. Bella, with a quick, slight movement of her head, signals 'no' and turns away. Suddenly Sara knows: the naked women are digging their own graves! Sara tries to tear her dress, to cover her mother's nakedness, wrap her dress around her mother. A woman next to Sara gives her a pinch and pulls her back. An SS notices that something's going on and suddenly Sara feels the hard crack of a rifle butt against her skull.

Sara awakens. SS yelling and shouting. People are shoveling, covering the grave. No longer can Sara see her mother. But the earth is moving! Like ocean waves the earth is moving! And bleeding! Pools of blood seep up from the earth. As if the earth is crying...

Sara walks in a long black tunnel – its essence is emptiness. Eternal night. Sara's tunnel is a memory of horrors Sara has seen with eyes which no longer reflect light, eyes which see whether open or closed, her mother – naked, digging her own grave – eyes which have seen the earth heave and cry blood.

Sara digs in the frozen ground. If you behave, Jews, the guards are taunting, we're not going to kill you...after the war you'll be our workers to fix all this back like it used to be. Sara is spitting blood, ill with pneumonia and a raging fever. The woman digging next to her, a woman Sara doesn't know, is helping her. A young German soldier approaches.

"You know," he addresses Sara, "you don't look like a Jew...maybe you're not even Jewish."

"Yes, I am Jewish," Sara replies, "my mother is Jewish, my father is Jewish, my grandparents are Jewish, even my great-grandparents are Jewish."

The young German soldier raises his rifle butt and in one swift arc smacks it against Sara's left arm. Suddenly, a bone is sticking out of her arm and Sara cries in

pain. The soldier turns on the heel of his boot and stalks off. The woman digging beside Sara, who'd been helping her a moment ago, quickly tears a strip of cloth from her own dress and uses it to bandage Sara's arm. Now Sara is digging again, holding her broken arm close against her body, struggling with her good arm to dig in the frozen ground, struggling to remain 'useful,' the one and only reason prisoners are permitted one more day of life in Auschwitz; one more day of breathing air weighted with the ashes of tens of thousands of murdered families, one more day of surviving on a crust of stale bread, a bowl of watery soup augmented with a handful of dirt thrown in by a sadistic guard. One more day of forgetting to look up toward a black sun. In the evening a Polish woman, a doctor, secretly administers an aspirin to Sara, an aspirin stolen from the infirmary.

In the months since their arrival at Auschwitz new hair has begun to grow on the women's shaven scalps. But because of severe malnutrition, the hair quickly falls away and the women remain mostly bald. Many women lose their teeth as well, and boils and all types of skin eruptions are common. Sara's skin, however, remains clear. There is no water for drinking, no water for bathing. Snowfall is welcome. Everyone grabs handfuls of snow and scrubs their bodies. Some Yugoslavian soldiers who were captured by the German army have carved combs from scraps of wood; the men throw the combs over the fences which divide their *Lager* from the women's, and the women pass the combs to those who have some hair to comb.

Magda, the block commander who oversees the women in Sara's block, metes out punishment for the slightest noise in the form of a blow to the head with a wooden shoe, so there is no respite anywhere. A mother and her two daughters lay suffering together; one daughter is in a fevered state from a gaping wound on the sole of her right foot, and the block commander passes near enough to hear the girl's feeble cry. In a flash the shoe comes down on the girl's head. Two days pass before mother and sister acknowledge her death. They must pull her body out, carry it to the pile of bodies waiting for the crematoria, and leave it there.

Whenever Sara fails to return from her errands quickly enough the block commander kicks and hits her with those Dutch shoes. And she wields those shoes even when she imagines that Sara's breathing is too loud. But the commander doesn't kill Sara. Instead, she destroys the blood vessels on the right side of her brain. Block commanders were chosen from among the prisoners for such characteristics as anti-social or aberrant behavior, or for being a gentile, or for no discernable reason at all. And the fate of a block commander, should a lapse of vigor and enthusiasm for the task come to be noticed by a German officer, was a bullet to the head or a march to the gas chambers, whichever struck the officer as more expedient.

One night Magda removed her clothes to show the women in 'C' *Lager* the reason for her anger and bitterness. "You think I'm bad to you?" she shrieked. "They let all the dogs on us! In the beginning we were a group of thirty-five girls from the ghetto in Warsaw, and just for an afternoon entertainment they drank whiskey and they had a big cane and a rifle, each one, and a dog. I was the lucky one who survived." And Magda demonstrated how she had tried to protect her face from attack by the ferocious dogs. "So I'm no longer human and I don't look on any of you as human either."

The women looked and they saw the terrible ravages on the block commander's body where the dogs had chewed off chunks of her flesh. So then they understood how

she had become a monster, although many who experienced a hell such as hers and were later put in positions of authority did not become monsters; they did no more than was absolutely demanded of them. But the Nazis rewarded Magda and others like her with extra rations of bread for their cruelty.

One afternoon a transport of Jewish families from Czechoslovakia arrived, in the midst of a blizzard, to 'A' *Lager* and those who looked on realized that an eternity had passed since they'd seen whole families together. Jolted backwards toward another time and place faint memories of family life stirred. Innocently, they imagined that the Nazis were going to let these families live, until some hours later in the middle of the night, they heard screaming and the noise of chaos, frantic confusion and terror. Then at 3 a.m. roll call the prisoners looked over toward 'A' *Lager* and saw the remnants left behind in the snow: clothing, pots, dishes – the *Lager* had been completely emptied of human beings. The entire transport, no selection, had been pushed into the gas chambers. The ovens were going at full capacity and all through the night flames and ashes and the smell of burning flesh permeated the air of Auschwitz, the stench reaching villages miles away.

And at roll call the SS patrol endless rows of prisoners who stand at attention, three feet from each other, tattered rags their only insulation from freezing gales and snow. The glare of searchlights illuminate the bitter night and the canes point, you...you...you...

A mother and her daughter are holding hands, shivering; this is what the SS go for. A cane whips the icy air and points to the daughter. Sara is alone. She pinches her cheeks, hoping to appear strong and hardy, and somehow manages to survive another roll call.

## Stutthof

Sara had survived almost a year in Auschwitz when a group of ten girls, including her, were selected for farm labor. Alongside prisoners of war from Scotland, England and Australia these ten girls spent their days in fields cutting hay and harvesting potatoes. Inhaling the fragrant air, Sara felt as if she'd been delivered to Paradise, for the sun, bright golden-yellow, had been restored to a clear blue sky.

A mechanized mower, such as Sara hadn't seen before, pulled by a tractor, cut the high grass. Then, working side by side, the prisoners and concentration camp girls tied the grass into bundles. Each worker was expected to produce four bundles. To keep pace with the cutting machine the task had to be accomplished quickly, but Sara suffered from prolonged starvation so it was difficult for her to perform this task. Whenever the guards' attention was diverted, the POWs who labored beside Sara reached over and tied the bundles for her. The starving girls, to supplement their diet of scraps left over by the POWs, ate raw potatoes or sweet potatoes directly from the soil, and remembering the ladle of disgusting soup in Auschwitz they relished the taste of the raw, unwashed potatoes. When the soldiers wandered off to lounge under a tree and drink their whiskey the POWs spoke to the girls in low, compassionate tones. In German they asked, Who are you? Where did you come from? After listening to the girls relate their stories the POWs stole food for them, and soap, and smuggled the supplies under the door of the barn where the girls slept, locked in for the night.

After six weeks of farm labor one of the POWs, an Englishman, the one who'd shown the greatest kindness and had taken the greatest risks on their behalf, revealed to the girls that he was Jewish. The following day the POWs were taken away and the girls were transferred to Stutthof, a concentration camp still under construction.

When they arrived in Stutthof a typhus epidemic was raging throughout the camp, and as they passed through the gate they saw in every direction endless piles of corpses, stacked crosswise like pieces of wood.

"What's going on here?" the girls asked a group of three prisoners.

"There's not enough time to bury all the dead. Now you're here, you'll help."

Putrid smoke enveloped the place and flames billowed from chimneys. The sun had vanished. The air was dense and thick with death.

Sara's heart stirred in a momentary arousal of awareness: Do I have anybody here that I know? But what difference does it make? We're all gonna be on a pile like wood sooner or later.

For the benefit of Red Cross inspectors, to whom Stutthof had been described as a detention center, neat gardens had been planted near the gates. The soil, Sara noticed, was suffused with a rotten yellowish cast and she wondered, How could anything grow in such a place as this?

The guards shoved them, Let's go! Let's go! And threatened them with large, black dogs. Every guard carried a rifle, ready to strike a blow or fire a shot, and a dog accompanied every guard. At lunchtime the guards set the dogs free and the dogs appraised the prisoners, snarled and lunged at their easy prey. All around people lay



dying from typhus, starvation, injuries and infections.

Here, Sara knew, there was no future. Here the prisoners didn't speak of the future, they spoke of dying because here, dying was normal. In fact, better to die sooner than later. Here, friends said to one another, You know something, I wouldn't mind dying because there's nothing left, the world has ended...but before I die I just want to have enough bread and water, then I'd die happy.

Their diet consisted of watery coffee and a swallow of watery soup and to prevent them from deriving any sort of comfort from the soup the SS were fond of tossing handfuls of sand into the pot. And when bread was available it arrived in the form of small, hard six-inch loaves, mostly sawdust, distributed one loaf to five prisoners, and the starving prisoners were forced to divide the meager portions among themselves. That very precious little bit of bread was kept hidden somewhere on the body to save it for later; better to eat the last remaining crumb before sleep because if a crumb still existed it was stolen in the night by young women so crazed with starvation that refined upbringings in Budapest, with nannies and private music lessons and silk hair ribbons, were all forgotten.

Sara was the youngest in this group. Aware of her own vulnerability Sara didn't save her bread. And she felt utterly alone, all her people divided and lost, alone in her tunnel of emptiness. And in the beginning, in Auschwitz, Sara had learned not to cry. Crying could earn you a bullet in the head: You're not happy? I'll get rid of that! Or, if the kapo saw you cry she beat you: Crybaby! We have no room for crybabies here! Or maybe Sara had ceased crying the day she saw the earth weep tears of blood and she had gone on, living and suffering and wondering, Had her mother received the mercy of a Nazi bullet before being suffocated beneath shovelful of earth? And her mother's last, desperate, protective act: Don't acknowledge me! Sara remembered her mother's dead eyes. It must have been then that Sara had stopped crying. It must have been then that absolute loneliness had wrapped itself around her heart.

There was no routine in Stutthof. The men were forced to work at building crematoria but the women were pushed into barracks so overcrowded that they lay on top of one another barely able to breathe. And the barracks were sealed tight and dark. Once a day the soup arrived and those who strayed a step from the line got hit, and some prisoners tried to push ahead of others. Once a day, no more, the women were permitted access to the latrine, allowed only so many minutes. Raus! Raus! Do it! Anyone who didn't move fast enough, and even those who finished quickly, received blows from the guards. And anyone who required more than one trip to the latrine suffered even worse beatings.

Winter 1944. Freezing snow. Penetrating wind. Women in threadbare rags. Sara broke icicles from her hair and from the rags which hung on her emaciated body, and melted the icicles against her parched tongue. She wondered, Why am I still alive when all I see is frozen bodies?

The wind howled. She no longer thought about Krive, or the fun she'd had as a child, whizzing down a snow-packed hill on the sled her great-grandfather had made for her with his own hands. She no longer thought about her cousins, and the laughter they had shared, or Sabbath mornings and great-grandmother's pockets filled with goodies. But Sara heard a voice, a loving voice; it was a whisper, and yet she heard it despite the howling wind: You will survive, *mein kind*, you will survive.

January 1945. The Nazis grew increasingly frantic in their desire to exterminate Jews. Jews were loaded onto old dilapidated boats which were set adrift and dynamited, the fate of a friend of Sara's. Thousands were forced to dig their own graves. Prisoners at Auschwitz were given lethal injections; this happened to a friend of Sara's but in this case the Nazis, running out of supplies and time, were in such a frenzy that they administered an insufficient dosage for death, so the girl survived with a damaged arm. And when new shipments of bullets were late they used their rifle butts to fracture the skulls of their victims.

Thunder of Allied bombs drew nearer, causing the Nazis to become crazed in their last minute efforts to wipe out evidence of their crimes. Suddenly, evacuation orders: 3,500 women, mostly young girls from Stutthof and Birkenau, were hastily rounded up in snow soiled with slaughter and ashes, and SS guards forced the girls to march out of the camps, away from the barbed wire and the crematoria, away from the gas chambers and endless freezing roll calls. Then the German soldiers demonstrated that once established in the minds of men, evil, to flourish, requires little in the way of material aids.

## The Death March

With scraps of tattered cloth Sara hastily wrapped her numb feet. Some luckier ones found remnants of blankets which they tied around their feet. Whoever couldn't keep up was shot on the spot, the bodies trampled by those who followed; to hesitate out of mercy invited a smack from a rifle butt. Let's go! Let's go! March! March! They marched for miles through foreign white landscapes, eyes searching the fields they crossed for anything which might prove edible, as long as the soldiers didn't notice when they bent to retrieve potatoes grown for livestock. Reaching for a frozen potato could cost a prisoner her life. Along the way, some good citizens of the land looked on in shock at this terrible procession of suffering human beings. Others laughed. At night the Nazis locked their prisoners in barns. The Nazi guards were young, the highest rank among them was sergeant and the oldest might have been twenty-one, although most appeared to be eighteen or nineteen and they didn't know what to do with their prisoners.

Trying to avoid the Russians and advancing Allied forces, they marched in zig-zag patterns across the cold winter countryside.

More young women died than survived. In the third week the Polish doctor who'd stolen aspirin to save Sara's life, fell. Seventeen months earlier, a neighbor who'd held grievances against her had reported to the SS that the doctor was a communist, and based on this testimony the doctor had been arrested and sent to Auschwitz.

American and Polish fighter planes were unable to distinguish camp survivors from soldiers, as the survivors were made to walk military style in formation of fives. During attacks, the SS took cover under foliage while Allied bombs killed hundreds of survivors. In one bombing raid a friend of Sara's from Stutthof lost a leg. Standing on her remaining leg, the girl held her dismembered limb and in shock she cried over and over again, Oh my God! look at my foot! look at my foot! An SS aimed his rifle at the girl's head, and still cuddling her leg, she fell in the blood-soaked snow. Those who were injured in the bombings bandaged themselves as hurriedly as they could, and hobbled on. The SS permitted the wounded prisoners another miserable mile of life and then shot them dead.

The German guards enjoyed cooking slabs of bacon and other pungent foods and eating openly in the presence of the starving prisoners. And they made a great show of smoking, drinking and laughing. Often, a guard was in the mood for violence, but he felt too lazy to attack a prisoner himself, so he sent his dog instead.

The Death March was about to enter its seventh week when, one evening as dusk settled over the German landscape, the guards shoved the surviving girls, whose numbers had diminished to about one-hundred-fifty, into a barn. In the center of the barn floor they cut into the ground a large rectangular depression, like a pool, and poured into this depression a liquid chemical substance with an odor reminiscent of turpentine. Then the guards waited. As each girl fell unconscious she was dragged to the pool. In addition to all their miseries the girls all suffered from typhus and the chemical pool was believed to prevent its spread.

Sara drifted in and out of consciousness, unable to feel anything. Outside snow was falling and drifted through the rafters. From time to time, in dazed and fevered awakenings, Sara scraped handfuls of snow from her body and pushed them into her mouth. Day after day they remained trapped inside the barn, most of the girls too weak to move, and subsisted on peelings of rotten potatoes tossed inside by their captors.

Sara's friend Jenny lay dying beside her. Jenny's head hung limp to one side; they came to get her for the pool and they lifted her feet. Jenny opened her eyes. She looked at Sara and a smile came over her face, a Mona Lisa smile. She knew it was time, she knew that very soon she wasn't going to feel anything anymore. Jenny looked peaceful. And then, Sara heard the splash of Jenny's body being cast into the pool. A sound of absolute futility. A sound of infinite loss. Sara felt blackness creeping over her, extinguishing the last vestiges of pain. Ah, good! Soon I won't feel anything anymore. The splashing sound of yet another girl being thrown into the pool echoed in the emptying barn.

Finally, in the early hours of a morning, a few girls peered outside through the spaces in the barn siding and saw the soldiers running away. And when dawn arrived those few who still had strength felt too frightened to open the barn doors, afraid a few soldiers still lingered, waiting to shoot them. So hours of daylight passed until they pushed the doors open and saw with surprise and relief that no one was there.

The few strong ones walked to a small town visible from the hill on which the barn stood, in search of help, and when they reached the town, Kenievey, located only a few miles south of

Berlin, they came upon a detachment of Russian soldiers who returned with them to the barn. The soldiers carried the girls who were too weak to walk out of the barn, then lifted them onto horse-drawn wagons brought from town. Sara was one of those rescued by the Russian soldiers.

## Liberated

With great relief the soldiers transferred to the nuns at St. Mary's responsibility for Sara and a few other girls so badly infested with lice that just to touch any part of their bodies meant coming away with a handful of lice. The soldiers never returned to the barn, so ten or twelve girls who'd lost consciousness remained there, forgotten.

For two weeks Sara lay unconscious in the hospital at St. Mary's. She awoke to a vision of white, the stark beauty enhanced by streams of sunlight. The air around her felt clean and calm, and the nuns appeared as angels, moving about in white habits. A large crucifix hung on the wall above Sara's bed.

Isn't that funny, Sara thought. I went through hell because I was Jewish and when I died they put me in a Christian heaven. Dear God, if You really exist why do You make all these mistakes? Now she was in a peaceful place, although she imagined these angels meant she had died. Suddenly, the indescribable despair in her heart sprang forth, and Sara screamed.

Immediately, a nun turned from her work and came to Sara's bedside. "My child..." the sister spoke calmly and soothingly. "My child, you are not dead...you've been unconscious...you are alive...you've been liberated, and you are in St. Mary's Hospital."

Sara could not believe these words, spoken in such soft musical tones by this angelic woman, for she recalled that before passing out in the barn she'd felt relieved that blackness was finally settling in all around her, and she remembered thinking, Ah, it's wonderful, now I'm dying, I'm not gonna feel all that pain anymore. She remembered feeling relaxed. She remembered feeling incredible happiness.

Sara's anguish again sought release. Somehow, it felt comforting to scream without fear of a beating. Sara screamed again. "No! No! They made a mistake! I am not Sara! Sara died! How could she have survived? I'm someone else...I'm Maria! That's what it is! The other person, that Sara, she's dead, and I must be Maria!" And for a while this is what Sara believed.

Except for her frostbitten toes, Sara discovered that she could feel her body, and she could move. Despite appeals from the nuns, Sara felt compelled to leave the hospital, to prove to herself that she was alive, to find someone she knew. If she found someone with whom she had a connection then her aliveness would be validated. Otherwise, alone, Sara Kaufman existed only in a dream. Alone, she must be a new girl, with a new name. Maria.

Concentration camp survivors had gathered in the center of Kenievey, dying of typhus and from the effects of food eaten too quickly. A huge pit received the dead. Apparently, many citizens of Kenievey, fearful of Russian soldiers, had abandoned their town, and those who remained could summon the initiative to toss the dead bodies of concentration camp survivors into a pit, but were utterly lacking in compassion for the survivors. So the survivors languished near the pit and in misery awaited their own deaths.

Sara learned that after they'd left her at St. Mary's the Russian soldiers had

instructed some townspeople to find shelter for twenty-five girls they'd rescued from the barn. The girls were taken to abandoned houses. With fierce determination, unable to stand on her frostbitten feet, but armed with this new information, Sara dragged herself along the ground, leaning on her hands and on her buttocks, desperate to find someone she knew. Sara had become a skeleton, just some bones covered with skin, and her skin barely protected by a tattered rag dress. Several of her teeth were missing, most of her hair had fallen out. And Sara's growth had been arrested at the age of twelve in the Matihskow ghetto, two years ago.

An old house. Inside the house: darkness, damp cold. Against a wall a wood stove. Across the room two small beds. And from the beds could be heard the muffled sounds of misery. Sara crawled nearer and recognized Edith and Chavie! Two sisters from Krive! In terrible agony! Unbelievable condition! "Water!" they cried, when they saw another human being had entered the room. "Bread!" Sara dragged herself outside again, in search of food.

In the kitchen of another abandoned house she discovered a brown paper bag containing kimmel seeds, a seasoning for soups and bread, and Sara remembered that soup cooked with kimmel was a favorite cure employed by Grandmother Rivka for stomachache. She returned to Edith and Chavie. With wood from a broken doll cradle, and paper torn from German books scattered on the floor, Sara built a fire in the stove, although when she tried to blow on the sparks Sara coughed blood. On her raw and bleeding buttocks she searched the kitchen for a pot, filled one with water and cooked kimmel soup. She cut up some hard stale bread which she added to the soup...and then she fed Edith and Chavie. After five or six days they started to feel better. Several other concentration camp girls came to stay with them and whoever could walk went out in search of supplies; in the cupboards and trunks of abandoned houses they found stale bread, a bit of flour, beans or a potato or clothing. Whatever was found was brought back to their communal home and shared by all.

After three or four weeks the Russian soldiers called a meeting. Trains to the cities were scheduled to begin departure from Kenievey once a day. Relief supplies, the Russians announced, were being organized by the Red Cross and the Joint Distribution Committee. The soldiers offered to bring the girls to the train station in horse-drawn wagons.

The girls wanted to go home to Czechoslovakia, so Sara, not knowing where else to go, decided she, too, would go home. Maybe she'd find a relative who was still alive. So the trains that had brought them to Auschwitz now transported them out of Germany. Only Jews travelled on the trains. No guards pushed them in and every door remained open. Everyone agreed, the doors must stay open. During the journey people sat in the door openings inhaling the fresh air of the countryside and feeling the freedom of spring breezes blowing through the train.

Red Cross workers and Russian soldiers brought food and water on board. They distributed bread, and bread to a survivor was the most important thing in the world. They brought "Care" packages, and for the first time Sara saw a box of Corn Flakes. When she learned that Corn Flakes were a breakfast cereal she saw in her mind grandmother Rivka, who belonged now to another lifetime. She saw her grandmother, head covered with a gaily colored scarf, preparing cereal by grinding dough into farfel.

Many survivors were detached from their feelings, detached even from their

broken hearts. From the train they gazed out at a world they'd imagined must have ended when everyone they knew and loved was tortured to death, and in this new world, which had somehow emerged from the depths of evil, they felt nothing.

Except hunger. Sara opened a small package of American cereal and discovered the pleasant crunch of Corn Flakes. She unwrapped a cube of sugar and suddenly remembered herself and her cousins squeezing a few drops of lemon juice onto a sugar cube, a special childhood treat. Freshly-baked bread was distributed and the survivors alternated a little bite of bread with a nibble of sugar, careful to hide in a pocket a piece of bread for later. Paradise.

The survivors didn't think about tomorrow. Only today. Now...now...now. Occasionally the train reached a place where the tracks had been damaged by the war and they were delayed for days while the tracks were repaired, but the delay didn't bother them; a delay on the tracks meant nothing to those who had survived Hitler's Final Solution. On that train which carried Sara toward the rest of her life she found a philosophy for her life: You're never gonna have it as bad as you already had it, so there's nothing to complain about. No crematorias, no soldiers hitting you, killing you. But still, absolutely no feeling. The war was over but Sara felt no excitement. In the barn she'd been relieved to think she was dying, relieved that for her there'd be no more fighting to survive. And then she awoke in St. Mary's Hospital and discovered that the fight was on again. And travelling on this train toward the rest of her life Sara wondered, What am I fighting for? My family is gone.

Three Red Cross workers board the train and move about among the survivors, distributing blankets, food and supplies. Suddenly, Sara recognizes a familiar voice, and sees Zvei, a young man from Krive.

"Zvei! Zvei!" Sara cries out. "Look! Here! It's me! Sara Kaufman!"

Zvei pauses and looks around. From where is this cry coming? "Who?" he says.

"I am Sara...Sara Kaufman."

Zvei stares at Sara and recognition finally comes to him. He clasps his large gentle hands, sways, and his eyes fill with tears. "My God! What have they done to you?"

Zvei is hungry for any information regarding survivors from Krive and Sara tells him about Edith and Chavie. "They couldn't come on this train but they'll follow on the next one."

"There are survivors from Budapest," Zvei explains, "They were hidden in bunkers in the forest and now we have a 'kibbutz' in Bucarest, where we have people recuperating, and you have there a cousin, her mother was your mother's favorite aunt. Her name is Sarah...she's a survivor from one of the bunkers. But listen...I can't send you there looking like this. First, we have to put some meat on your bones...my God...what can you weigh? Seventy pounds?"

To avoid capture by the Nazis the survivors now living on the Kibbutz in Bucarest had gone into secret underground bunkers. Zvei, and a young companion, Erno Pal, had supplied them for the duration of the war with food, medication and ammunition.

"Sara, you are the first one I see from the camps who I know from before...from before the war. I'll bring you to the Kibbutz in Bucarest...but first, you'll stay with a couple, a woman I know...she'll take care of you."

So right then Zvei led Sara off the train and brought her to the house of a Slavish

couple, parents of adult children who no longer lived at home. The woman brought fresh produce from the farmers, and Sara was surprised to see fresh produce. She'd imagined everything in the world had been destroyed! Now she tasted butter again! The woman's husband was often drunk and he shouted a lot but his behavior, rather than frightening Sara, served instead to stir a memory of what liquor could do to men. She remembered and hurt for the concentration camp girls who'd been raped on the train. When first they had observed the survivors, compassion showed distinct in the eyes of the Russian soldiers, but then they drank an excess of whiskey and raped whoever still looked human.

Sara began to worry that if she stayed in one place the Germans would somehow find her and drag her back to Auschwitz, so she felt a constant restlessness. But of even more immediate concern, Sara had begun coughing again; she was feverish, cold, and coughing up blood. The woman gave Sara a rag of a dress, as rags were all the woman had, but Sara owned a Red Cross blanket now, as well as a few meager possessions tied up in a scarf, so she felt rich, and she owned a pair of shoes, too large, but they protected her feet from the bare ground. She stayed with the Slavish couple for three or four weeks and then Zvei came for her. Through the Red Cross Zvei had made arrangements for her passage to Romania.

Along the way in every big city the Red Cross or Joint Distribution Committee distributed bread and butter, various food and clothing. Sara and a few young survivors on the train drew close together and formed a group to protect and assist one another. One girl had lost an eye, one a foot, another had lost an arm. One afternoon they opened a package and unwrapped a big salami. They stared at the salami and wondered what to do with it. Let's put it away, they decided, let's save it for later, such a treasure we should only hold and look at. After a time they shared small slices. They were travelling in a regular train car with passenger seats and the other passengers looked in shock at the sight of these emaciated, broken human beings engaged in such an engrossing conference over a salami. Every time the survivors saw soldiers they stiffened in fear. Ach! They're coming to take us away! Or take our food! Our water! Everyone else thought the war was over, but they knew better. In their minds the war really wasn't over and any minute everything might begin to happen all over again! So they found it difficult to sleep. If before, they reasoned, the grownups had been around and the grownups hadn't been able to prevent the horror, what could they do if it should happen again that their safety was threatened?



## The Kibbutz

Sara stands inside the gates of the villa which has been taken over by Habonim, a Jewish Youth Organization. Young survivors of hidden bunkers and partisan fighters who survived for months and years in the forests are finding their way here to heal and be educated for the journey to Palestine. A small welcome committee has gathered. Suddenly, from across the lawn comes a shriek, "Sara!!!" and Sara's cousin Sarah is running. Then Sara is screaming, and both are screaming – "Sara!" "Sarah" – and sobbing, they cling to each other. The welcome committee witnesses the reunion and soon everyone is weeping and laughing all at once. Zvei's young friend, Erno Pal, is present and assists Sara into the spacious house and up the wide staircase to a small, peaceful room.

The leaders of the kibbutz assessed the condition of Sara's health and assigned two girls to manage her daily care. The communal spirit necessary for the monumental task which lay before them – establishment of a secure Jewish State in Palestine – had already taken hold of their consciousness, informing every act, so it was natural that every one of the young survivors there assumed a personal interest in Sara's convalescence and they came, individually or in small groups, to visit her in her room. Some came, forlorn, seeking information about loved ones: Maybe you saw my sister, Marele? Maybe you met my mother, Soshi Greenberg? Blue eyes, see? like mine?

Too weak to move, Sara lay on a cot, fevered and coughing. With untiring patience and a soothing sense of family, the girls bathed her and fed her nourishing soup in slow, deliberate spoonfuls, encouraging her to eat.

"After everything, Sara, wouldn't it be a crime to give up now? Come, come, one more swallow."

In the communal kitchen they prepared appetizing meals for her, but after one taste Sara fell back against the pillow, exhausted, coughing and burning with fever, overcome by her wounded lungs, a sense of futility, as well as a total lack of interest in food.

"Tell us, Sara, what would you like to eat, whatever you want, just tell us."

Momentarily aroused by the question, Sara replied, "Scrambled eggs and a sour pickle."

At that moment young Erno Pal entered the room. Although he was only seventeen, Erno's presence vibrated with quiet, capable strength. His dark blue eyes reflected serious determination: determination not only for his own survival but for the survival of his people, determination to realize their collective dream of a return to the Jewish homeland. Erno had for four years outwitted the Nazis and outlasted them. His attention focused now on Sara.

"She would eat," Eva informed him, "if you could find her eggs and a sour pickle."

Erno knelt beside Sara's cot. "Eggs and a pickle?" He gazed into her face, so pale and fragile, and noticed the neat flap of Sara's Red Cross blanket as it lay folded across her emaciated shoulders. "I'll go all over Bucarest, Sara, until I find them somewhere."

Outside, Erno revved up his battered motorcycle. Eggs and a pickle were the most urgent mission of his day.

And sure enough, later, Eva brought Sara a plate of warm scrambled eggs; the eggs were fresh, laid that dawn in some farmer's hen loft, and a sour pickle from who knew where, thinly sliced. Then, with a commitment born of knowing that no other task in all the world was more important, Eva fed Sara.

Their days on the kibbutz were structured and full of hope, for they shared a common goal, to "make Aliyah." to reach the Promised Land which awaited its ingathering of souls – mostly young – who yearned for renewal. Zvei taught classes in Hebrew and about the realities of life in Palestine. Teachers arrived from Palestine to instruct them in the agricultural demands of the desert. They also prepared the survivors for real kibbutz life, which in the Holy Land promised to be harsh and demanding amid hostile Arab neighbors. The students learned the songs and dances of hope, these young people who had avoided concentration camps by enduring underground existences in bunkers dug beneath the floors of gentile farmers' closets.

Each week the Joint Distribution Committee posted long lists of names and addresses of American Jews who were searching for European relatives, and a few people were reunited, but Sara had no American relatives.

Cousin Sarah spent hours at her bedside and slowly she revealed her story to Sara. Sarah's family had lived about two hours northeast of Krive. Sarah had attended boarding school in Budapest, so initially chance had saved her from deportation to the ghetto. "Later on there was a teacher who helped me acquire false papers and it was the papers that protected me for a while. Until the day the soldiers came marching with their boots and their guns into my school. I was so frightened! And one soldier takes out a piece of paper and reads off my name! Right there in my history class! Someone had betrayed me! Someone I knew and probably smiled at and spoke to."

"I know what that feels like, too, to be betrayed," Sara said. And she told how her friends in Krive had stood on the corner and laughed and clapped, "Goodbye, Jews!"

"Ach! I can still see it," Sarah went on with her story. "There I am, thinking about Biology, my next class, as much as you could think about anything, worried sick all the time about my parents and everyone, and the next thing there are soldiers calling my name, and as I sat there in shock, I heard a whisper from behind me somewhere, 'I always thought she was a Jew'. And then I had to stand up to leave, my knees were shaking and I was afraid of crying in front of everyone, and I see my teacher, a look in her eyes, and suddenly I remember, this thought goes flying through my head of when I heard her, outside the library, talking to the librarian, how she had just heard about the Jews from my town, her brother was from there, and she described to the librarian how the sidewalks were crowded with townspeople, how everyone stood there and watched the Jews being taken away. I heard my teacher say how as soon as the Jews were gone everyone ran like crazy and grabbed from the houses all the Jewish belongings, bedding and furniture and food, everything they could carry. Ach!" Then Sarah explained that she and Erno had known each other well in Budapest as members of Habonim, the Zionist Youth Organization. "Sara, you should know, I owe my life to Erno."

It was raining outside, and thundering, and they were warm and cozy, and the rain put Sarah in the mood to go on with her story. "I was brought by the soldiers right

away to this awful place, an open pit, and in it, I tried not to look, were so many people dead and dying, they had just fallen into the pit from being shot, and they were laying, God, they were laying every which way, on top of each other, and I know my turn is coming, and what should I do? A soldier raises his rifle and points it at my head. And all of a sudden, from nowhere, I see Erno! He's riding up on his motorcycle, and he's wearing a disguise! Sara, I knew him right away! His face! Erno disguised in the uniform of a German army soldier. He points, and with such authority! like a real officer. He points to me and he says, in such impeccable German, clipped, the way they speak, those Nazis, "This one has important information! I will take her! *Mach schnell!* Make it fast!" So they motion for me to go! and I get on the back of his motorcycle!" And with an altogether convincing flourish of indifferent haste Erno sped away with Sarah to one of the hidden bunkers.

The bunkers were underground rooms, just large enough to accommodate sleeping space on tiered planks. Evenings, well past sunset, one at a time and one standing guard, the young people ventured up through the camouflaged trap door and spent a few anxiety-laden moments inhaling fresh air. All the other hours of the day they remained motionless, side by side in the bunker, in Sarah's case a group of eight, subject to all the fear and uneasiness natural to human beings forced to endure this existence, imagination provoked by the dank dark, bodies besieged by crawling things whose territory they were sharing; every discomfort one can imagine. Erno was their provider, their dependable link to the world outside.

These desperate arrangements, however, entailed the very real danger of betrayal, for it often came to pass that those hidden in the blackness of a bunker would suddenly hear the ominous sounds of approaching footsteps, German shouts, rifle butts pounding on the floor boards directly above their heads, trap door lifting... But Sarah's bunker remained safe beneath the floor of a righteous Christian couple, and on January 19, 1945 Zvei and Erno arrived to lead them out to freedom.

Sara's growth, suspended for two years, now resumed, and the delicate planes of her pale oval face became framed once more with a healthy profusion of dark russet hair. The dress she had arrived in six weeks earlier no longer fit and somehow, Sara had become pretty! She tried to ignore her feet, damaged from frostbite, which in cold weather felt numb and painful and on warm days burned like fire. Despite this, she began to feel like a human being again. She became social again, and aware of the paradise of her surroundings. Sara was aware also that Erno liked her, although she sometimes imagined he treated her no kinder than he treated anyone else.

Except for a passing glance when she combed her hair or washed her face, Sara avoided her reflection in the mirror. According to the response of other people, what she saw in their eyes when they looked at her, she understood that her appearance had improved. Because others now accepted her as normal-looking, she accepted herself. A legacy of Auschwitz: destroyed self-image. That alternate world of evil where ordinary encounters between human beings had been bizarrely redefined, permeated with horror, where just looking at one's companion demanded suspension of normal expectations. Fear of the human face distorted, as it had been in Auschwitz, or as it might be still – peering out from the mirror – prevented Sara from looking there.

"And what difference does it make?" Sara thought. "This world is not real and if it is real it's got nothing to do with me. Who knows? Tomorrow we could wake up and it'll

be back to what it was.” She didn’t trust life to go on being good or “normal.” And fear of attachment to anything! For who knew if anything would still be there when she awoke in the morning, including her own self, her own face.

And yet, despite all her fears Sara experienced a growing attachment to Erno Pal. Her alignment with Erno was an alignment with all the good that remained in the world. She knew that in his company she glimpsed the loveliness of her inner self which had been forgotten in the depths of her lonely black tunnel.

**ERNEST**

## Novoselo

Noveselo in northern Czechoslovakia: population about 10,000, including a few Jewish families. As far back as anyone in Novoselo could remember the Pal family had lived there and everyone knew Joseph Pal, Erno's father, a man who earned his living as a grocer and haberdasher but whose essence lay in his ability to recognize the needs of the people. Through his involvement in the Democratic Party Joseph befriended regional leaders and officials, and by no greater force than an honest commitment to the public good and a refined, cultured manner, managed, time after time, to obtain federal funds for civic improvement projects in Novesolo. In 1938 the citizens of Noveselo elected Joseph Pal to the office of Mayor of their city.

For the daughter and six sons of Joseph and his wife Miriam Esther, daily life was composed of long hours of study and learning. Erno, third eldest, dreamed of a life away from Novoselo, which seemed to him too confining and lacking in opportunity. One could ride in a horse-drawn wagon or pedal a bicycle, to reach in less than thirty minutes the regional city of Berhovo where the population reflected all the ethnic groups of the surrounding villages: Czechs, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Orthodox and Conservative Jews. Prominent speakers from Habonim and Dror, Jewish organizations with offices in Berhovo, and Jewish lecturers from nearby Bushvoro and Munckachero arrived regularly in Novoselo. These neighboring towns had Jewish populations large enough to support Hebrew high schools. The Zionist philosophy taught by the visiting scholars fired the imagination of young Erno Pal. The high ideals of the Zionist vision, longing for Palestine, dwelled beside Erno's dream for a life of opportunity that was unavailable in tiny Novoselo.

It was common on the streets of Novoselo to hear anti-Jewish remarks spoken in German, Ukrainian or Hungarian. Rowdy boys would taunt, "Dirty Jew!" to provoke fights, and in response the Jewish kids formed a close community. Erno strove continuously to live a Jewish life. Joseph Pal donated a prime lot of real estate to replace the old synagogue in town with a modern one. He raised the funds for its construction and with his personal capital he financed a rabbi and cantor.

When Erno was seven he went to UjPest, a new suburb of Budapest, for a summer visit with Aunt Sarika. The memory of his summer in UjPest, where all his father's sisters and brothers lived, remained with Erno and he begged his parents so often to let him go and live in UjPest that finally, one Sabbath evening after dinner, when the air in the garden was fragrant with the scent of apple blossom trees, Joseph Pal strolled with his son and agreed that Erno might go after his Bar Mitzvah. So it happened that in 1939 when Aunt Sarika returned home to UjPest from a visit to Novoselo, Erno travelled with her, his mind taken up with exciting thoughts of the possibilities awaiting him in his new life; he looked forward to studying at a higher level in school and dreamed of exploring further the Zionist philosophy which had engaged his imagination for all of his boyhood.

Although Sarika, her husband, and their five children welcomed him into their home with warmth and love, Erno's sense of obligation drove him to seek after-school employment. He found work in an upholsterer's shop and with the passage of several

months Erno had acquired enough skill as an upholsterer to qualify for a part-time job including room and board, enabling him, at the age of thirteen, to fulfill his desire for independence.

In synagogue one Friday evening Erno happened to meet up with two friends from school who spoke with great enthusiasm about Habonim, one of three important Zionist youth movements in Hungary. His new friends invited Erno to their homes for Sabbath dinners and the three boys quickly formed a close friendship. They invited Erno to a Habonim meeting, and it was during this first meeting in the basement of the synagogue, in the companionship of Jewish kids his own age, listening to dedicated young leaders describe the encroaching Nazi threat and the Habonim plan to organize for self-defense, that Erno realized the course of his life had changed – suddenly, irrevocably.

## Habonim

In 1942, the Nazis were becoming quite visible in Budapest. The threatening decibel of the Nazi presence broke upon each dawn and sunset with ever increasing force. Novoselo had been occupied since 1941 by Hungarian forces, and though not yet under the Nazi regime, Fascism had begun to unleash its program of propaganda and terrorism against the Jews. Each evening as daylight faded from the sky, Erno prayed to hear through his open window, the familiar footsteps and voices of a travel-weary Pal family, signaling at last their arrival in UjPest. And yet, his parents would not have allowed Erno to go out at night and take part in clandestine military training, never imagining betrayal by their good gentile friends and neighbors. They could not imagine a future so desperate that the wielding of weapons of destruction by Jewish children would become essential.

Habonim boys and girls began to train for specific military responsibilities; thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen year olds meeting in synagogue basements two and three times a week. Although self-defense training was not part of Zionist youth philosophy, and it emerged from the desperate circumstances of the time, Zionism had prepared the way, for it had taught Jewish youth to be proud of their Jewishness. Additionally, in preparation for the eventual goal of "making Aliyah," returning to Palestine, they attended classes in Hebrew.

The leaders were graduates of the Hebrew schools in Bushvero and Munkacs who joined their energies with Zvi Goldfarb, his wife Neshka, Uri Nazagovitch and Zvi Present to organize small Habonim groups. Zvi Present was the leader of Erno's group. Chana Senesh, 19, daughter of a Budapest journalist, was another remarkable leader. Chana infused every meeting with her dynamic, radiant energy. Her proud strength, her dedication to the cause, her physical as well as spiritual presence, inspired the young people, and they recognized in Chana the mark of a heroine. Eventually, Chana did make Aliyah, only to return to Budapest as a parachutist to undertake the most dangerous missions behind enemy lines. She continued these activities with true heroism until her capture in 1944. One of the saddest, lowest moments of Erno's life would be the sight of Chana in 1944 after she had been tortured by the Germans; Erno witnessed Chana Senesh being led by the Nazi guards to her execution.

The small Zionist youth groups were scattered throughout the towns and cities of Hungary and organized under a national Federation. Regional weekend meetings took place in the village of Chilbertz, high in the mountains of Budapest; these meetings usually drew about two-hundred-fifty kids who arrived by bike and train. There, Chana, as well as other leaders who held national posts in Habonim, conducted lectures and training classes. The leaders informed their young protégés that the present Hungarian regime would soon fall. They knew of Germany's ambition under Adolf Hitler to conquer Europe including Hungary, so they labored zealously to prepare against the inevitable attack on the Jewish community, although they had no knowledge in those early days of the ultimate fate of the Jews.



Uri Nazagovitch operated one of the several small print shops producing false documents to furnish hundreds of Habonim youth the protection of safe gentile identities. Nazagovitch forged and reproduced the signature of Oti Michlosh, President of Hungary, and later on the signatures of subsequent Fascist leaders who replaced Michlosh. Nazagovitch survived and eventually documented his underground activities.

Dozens of groups throughout Budapest and smaller surrounding cities and suburbs were linked to underground organizations by various levels of activities. In the beginning, Erno knew every member of his group of forty as well as their activities; as times grew increasingly dangerous they split up, and for mutual protection, knowledge of each other became limited.

The Hungarian government had remained neutral regarding the Jewish cause, but in late January 1944 the Fascist Salashi movement attained power and opened the borders to the German army. From that time on, Germany dictated all procedures in Hungary. During that time, when Erno had just reached his fifteenth birthday, he trained with grenades and pistols until a few rifles finally reached them, and all members of Habonim went through a training course of dismantling pistols, rifles and grenades, throwing grenades and firing guns.

The year passed slowly for Erno and his companions until suddenly a gruesome tide of tales from the concentration camps began to sweep over them. They realized the military training they'd had until then would have to suffice. The time for action had arrived. Chana Senesh and the other Habonim leaders directed such a vast amount of energy toward instilling the youths with confidence it seemed clear to Erno that it was only by the power of the leaders' commitment to them, that it was only in the reflection of their leaders' incredible light, that the young people might prove themselves worthy of Habonim and capable of protecting the Jewish community which they had sworn to do.

Erno was well-adapted to Hungarian behavior and style, and he spoke fluent Hungarian. He had inherited his mother's pale blond hair, which he wore long, and her wide, dark blue eyes, so the patrolling Nazis or police who'd been steeped in biased propaganda would never suspect him of being Jewish. Erno obtained documents which identified him as a Christian Hungarian by the name of Wadie Janosh. He was assigned a mission: infiltrate the Hungarian Nazi Youth movement, specifically the leadership training course. He mingled with the Nazi youths, carefully choosing districts where he was unknown and unlikely to come in contact with former Hungarian Christian friends. His physical and psychological training had prepared him to carry out his mission with confidence, but most important Erno felt propelled by an urgent, desperate struggle against time, against advancing evil. So he felt no fear, nor did he know at that age exactly what his fear was. Besides, there was no time for fear. His mission and his orders were in alignment with what he knew needed to be done. Completing his first dangerous mission, Erno graduated from the Nazi Youth movement's ninety-day officers' training course having achieved the rank of Lieutenant.

Meanwhile, the process of removing Jews from their homes and transporting them to ghettos had begun in Hungary. The yellow Star of David affixed to doors by Nazi decree identified Jewish homes and the yellow star was worn on armbands by every Jewish adult and child. Erno, as Wadie Jonosh, wore a uniform which identified him as a Lieutenant of the Nazi Youth and this role was a full-time job, replacing school and employment in the upholsterer's shop.

The Nazi Youth augmented the bullying “Aktions” of the Hungarian Nazi police. Lecturers who had the demeanor of street thugs justified the Nazi cause, the total elimination of all Jews from Hungary. Their hatred and the knowledge of what the Nazis really stood for tore at Erno’s heart, but his mind focused on the larger cause. He remained seated among the enemy, still and silent. He concentrated on disassociating himself from family and relationships with other Jews, and he avoided any sort of friendship with the Nazi youth who appeared to have been recruited solely from street gangs.

The uniform provided freedom of movement essential for the success of Habonim assignments, which led Erno to selected Jewish homes, names obtained from organization membership lists, where he alerted trusted individuals to the Nazi plan of genocide. Erno delivered into their hands false identity papers produced in Nazagovitch’s print shop. Despite this vital assistance in the dangerous business of getting them out Erno carried a burden of frustration, longing desperately to accomplish more.

And in the comfortless night, sleepless or lost in dreams of tumult and tragedy, Erno worried: Where was his mother? His father? His brothers? Was his sister safe? And friends? Have they already been deported? With knowledge of advancing disaster Erno worried, helpless to aid his loved ones. Soon he began to understand the futility of tears and self-punishment. Erno willed himself to walk with an aura of strength, and he became strong and brave. He understood that every action or failure to act, at any moment, might result in disaster for himself or for others in the underground, thereby weakening the organization or even losing individuals who might have been saved. Erno was among the youngest in Habonim, but he already looked upon himself as an adult and considered himself a leader. Within his heart resided fierce motivation to survive; he felt the weight of responsibility for so many lives awaiting rescue. He felt, also, a great desire to justify the confidence of his superiors. The swiftness of daily events permitted no time for contemplation and this interior landscape Erno traversed by instinct.

By 1943 Habonim had grown desperate to find safe hiding places and Erno was assigned to nighttime construction of underground bunkers. Financing was desperately needed, as well as people willing to engage in dangerous work. Clandestine agreements were cast: in exchange for financial reward homeowners permitted Habonim to dig under their floors to build bunkers. Wealthy Hungarian Jews who refused to believe, as Habonim warned, their situation could worsen, financed the pay-offs while remaining within their villas in deceptive safety. Money was funneled through Wallenberg and his contacts in Habonim. Thousands of people were saved this way, and it was only due to insufficient funds that thousands more were not saved. By early 1944 the police had knowledge of the underground network and they were investigating everywhere for hiding places, torturing everyone they found in hiding, often driving them insane.

March 1944. Nighttime activities. Erno was responsible for supplying necessities to the occupants of one of the hidden bunkers in the region. Dressed in the Nazi uniform and equipped with documents which identified him as a purchasing agent for Nazi youth officers, Erno bought bread and lard, considered a meal by itself, or flour, or sausage, any kind of meat available since meat was rationed, and delivered the food directly to

the bunker.

Daytime activities. Erno, in a Nazi uniform procured at great risk by some other Habonim member, entered ghettos and labor camps and presented false documents to the German command, identifying himself as an officer in the Nazi Youth movement with power to make arrests for the purpose of "investigation at Nazi headquarters." The documents requested transfer or "arrest" of certain Jews. These Jews he smuggled out to hiding places. Most joined the underground resistance movement. The names of Jews to be rescued in this manner were obtained from sources not necessarily sympathetic to the Jewish cause, although they were helpful to members of the underground as individuals. And members of the Hungarian communist party cooperated by providing information necessary to the success of various underground activities, not because of their sympathy for the Jews but based on their objections to the Nazi philosophy.

Through its connections with Israeli-trained commanders in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Habonim grew into a tight-knit organization of professionals. The Hungarian-Israeli Commander of Erno's Habonim group, seventeen-year-old Uri Palpi, saw the world through penetrating eyes, from which his companions felt the emanation of noble light. A paratrooper and direct commander of Chana Senesh, it was Uri's fate to actually be with Chana on the same failed mission which ended in Chana's capture. Uri, however, escaped.

To protect the individual members of the organization, orders were issued daily at designated meeting points, and among two or three people at most. Each day Erno was informed by a runner as to exact location of the next day's meeting. And Habonim Commanders never disseminated information regarding plans beyond the immediate need to know.

Erno's direct Commander was Willie Isaacovitch; seventeen, self-taught, from a religious home, Willie was the smartest person Erno ever knew. As a self-appointed leader, Willie initiated plans and was determined to complete all missions.

The crowds at the vast Kelety and Najuti train stations afforded anonymity. These two locations alternated with a busy public park, were points most often utilized for meetings. They avoided meeting after sundown, in secret places, or on the street.

One clear, cold day Erno was given an assignment which so disturbed the courageous, disciplined self he'd evolved into (he did not permit himself to acknowledge fear) that long after the war's end the mission's vivid scenes returned to haunt his sleep.

In his sleep Erno is transported back to Budapest. It is March 1944. It is a raw, silent, moonlit night. A German supply train is stationed at the depot. One car is packed with hand grenades, and the underground has learned the exact position of this particular car. Grenades are a frequent item in German transport and the underground must have grenades. Erno and two Habonim companions must break into the rail car. They are to gather up as many grenades as possible, using their pockets and uniform coats. Erno wears a coat of sturdy leather. First, they stake out the place and observe two Hungarian Nazis guarding the front section of the train. Although the guards have not been bribed as they sometimes are, they don't bother to patrol the rear. The assignment is to distract them and work around them.

One of Erno's Habonim companions distracts the two Nazi guards with friendly conversation. Erno and his other companion, using a bayonet, their only tool and

weapon, break into the designated rail car through a back door. Some of the grenades have been fastened onto short sticks, like broomsticks, double grenades. Suddenly, the sharp sound of a dog barking slashes the silence; the night magnifies every sound. Erno and his companion are swift, silent. They tuck grenades into their belts, load grenades around their bodies, into pockets. With precise steps they climb down from the rail car. With a casual show of ordinary routine for cover, they walk away from the depot, away from the guards, to a pre-arranged meeting place across town.

There, a runner takes a portion of the grenades for delivery to one of the hidden bunkers. Erno delivers the remainder of the grenades to his bunker.

That night Erno dreamed of his childhood in Novoselo, when he was engaged in scholarly pursuit and dedication to the Laws of Torah. In his dream he walked through old familiar streets. But as he passed everything exploded. He came to his home and it exploded. He passed the new synagogue his father built and it exploded.

Rakosh Palota, labor camp. Ko Banya, the largest brewery complex in Budapest, is located here. A prisoner at another labor camp has indicated that one of Erno's brothers is being held in Ko Banya.

Astride a motorcycle, Erno enters the camp. He is in full Hungarian Nazi uniform: leather military coat, lieutenant stripes, machine gun slung across his chest. In the breast pocket of his uniform Erno carries false documents, lists of prisoners' names to be summoned for "investigation." His brother's name is on the list. Amiel. But on this day Erno has not yet been provided with authorization to take Amiel out. Surrounded by Hungarian Nazis, he reports to the Nazi commander of the camp. He presents his documents and in fluent Hungarian requests the prisoner, Amiel Pal, for questioning. Erno is led directly to the officers' quarters, past thousands of prisoners standing in formation for the count. From among the endless rows of men, eighteen-year old Amiel is located and brought before Erno. Several years have passed since the brothers have seen each other. Erno struggles to maintain a mask of military indifference, though he glimpses a flicker of shocked recognition in his brother's eyes before Amiel hastily regains his own composure. Erno had received permission from the camp commander to interrogate this prisoner in private, so with precise, measured footsteps he leads Amiel to a small unoccupied office and closes the door.

Momentarily free to release their emotion, Erno and Amiel embrace. The controlled discipline each has worn like protective armor suddenly dissolves. As the brothers hold each other close they lose control and cry.

"I'll be back," Erno promises, "in a week or so I'll have the proper documents and I'll get you out of here..."

Amiel gives the names of four friends from Noveselo who are in Ko Banya with him.

Two days later Erno is arrested, and shortly afterward Amiel is transferred to another labor camp, this one deep inside the German border. Amiel survived, but many years pass and the war is over before they see each other again. In the same hour that their reunion transpired in Ko Banya the Hungarian Nazi police arrest a Habonim runner, a supplier of information for Erno, and another underground fighter. The runner, a young boy, breaks under torture and gives up the name of Erno's comrade. The comrade is arrested, taken in for investigation, and he, too, bargains away information, believing it is in exchange for his life. But after divulging all he knows the fellow is shot

dead in jail, the first in the Habonim organization to be executed by the enemy. That night, when Erno returns to his apartment, he finds the Nazi police, waiting for him.

Erno's investigation lasts three weeks. He denies any knowledge of the Zionist movement. He denies knowledge of the informer. He denies being Jewish. And he gives his captors virtually nothing to go on. He is transferred to a jail in the mountains of Buda reserved for political prisoners and survivors of initial investigations who, in the opinion of the Nazis, requires interrogators and torturers who are particularly skilled in their craft. Here, the Nazi interrogators immediately decide to inspect Erno's flesh for the 'mark of the covenant' so Erno is forced to reveal his circumcision. Despite this, Erno continues to convincingly assert an Aryan bloodline. He spouts Nazi ideology and Nazi slogans. He insists he's a Nazi Youth hero, a volunteer, and his interrogators trace the facts of his enrollment in the Hungarian Nazi Youth movement. They verify his officer's rank, his (cover) activities, and after thorough verification, and pending further investigation, they temporarily suspend his torture.

From the height of a second-story prison cell and with the assistance of other captives, sheets are tied, knotted and suspended from the narrow window, and Erno escapes. Into the biting, snowy night, the deep snow clawing at his feet, Erno runs, terrified. Any moment might sound the shouts of pursuit. Just as the first light of dawn streaks across the shadowy silver landscape, Erno arrives at the bunker. Immediately, he sends a message to Isaacovitch: "Want to get out. Need uniform, documents." The uniform and documents arrive and Erno goes out.

He returns to Rakosh Palota to get his brother Amiel, and there he learns of the transfer of prisoners to the German interior, where they were subjected to hard labor digging ditches and all the horrors of concentration camp existence. In crisp Nazi form, without betraying the profound disappointment and anguish which vibrate within his body, Erno salutes the commander, mounts his motorcycle and rides away from Rakosh Palota. He feels that his brother Amiel is lost to him and Erno blames himself for failing to complete the rescue mission. A flaming heat consumes his heart.

Erno resumes his place in the underground. He resumes the nightly deliveries of food and other necessities to the bunker. One cold, wintry night when the windswept torrents of freezing rain soak his garments and penetrate his bones, Erno arrives at the bunker exhausted and decides to stay the night. That night the runner with whom Erno has contact is arrested. The boy's resolve is swiftly broken and the location of the bunker revealed. Suddenly, within the darkness of the bunker the group of young Jews are roused by the sounds of approaching footsteps. Armed now with the knowledge of the inside way, of how to enter, how to get down there, the Hungarian Nazi patrol advances...

In Budapest lived an Hungarian communist who on political grounds was opposed to the Nazi ascendancy to power. This man owned a small country home in the mountains of Buda outside the city. During the winter months the home usually remained vacant, but this winter the man arranged for his mother to live there as a cover for twenty-three young Jews in hiding. The entranceway to the bunker was concealed beneath the armoire, which faced the front door, and clothing stored within the armoire provided camouflage for the false bottom which, when lifted, revealed a passageway to the cellar. The bunker had been built slowly, so as not to arouse suspicion among the neighbors. Two walls supported two levels of beds which were no

more than plain boards, and so narrow as to allow for sleeping on one's side only. By unanimous agreement among those who would be sharing the space it had been decided to bring into the bunker as many people as possible, despite the additional hardships this entailed, such as being unable to lie on one's back. As soon as the Habonim workers completed construction of the bunker they brought their companions in cautiously, one or two at a time. They lived in extreme silence underground, as only fifty feet away stood the home of a neighbor, and other neighbors' homes were scattered nearby, clearly visible through the bare winter branches of trees. Personal hygiene, respectfully organized, was attended to inside the bunker. Water was rationed: one cup per person, and each measured for himself the amount to drink and the amount to utilize for washing. The woman of the house shared her son's understanding for the desperation of the Jewish community, and she performed her role well, visiting with the neighbors, allowing herself to be seen outdoors quite often and maintaining a fire in the fireplace. Now it was over, with not even time for self-defense. And after that bitterly cold night when Erno and his comrades were captured neither mother nor son were seen or heard from again.

Erno and his twenty-three bunker companions were jailed. For nine days they endured interrogations and beatings. One morning at four o'clock, shrouded in a cold mist from the lake, surrounded by shadowed greys of the snowy landscape, Erno and several of his comrades were led by a squad of Nazi guards to a clearing beside the shore of Lake Duna, and by order of one of the Nazi officers the soldiers hoisted their rifles and the executions began. Erno fell first, and over his body other bodies fell, and Erno feigned death. From his grisly yet protected position he listened while the soldiers decided to take a break, warm up with some hot coffee and return after sunrise to finish the job by tossing the bodies into the Duna.

Erno crawled out from under the weight of his dead friends. Blood marked the luminous snow; on his clothing the blood of his friends was dark. He knew of other bunkers, but not the way to them, so Erno returned to places where he used to meet his people. Eventually, he contacted a runner who brought word of his whereabouts to Isaacovitch. In a train station Erno "borrowed" an overcoat, abandoned his blood-stained jacket, and later the same day at the Kelety-Paya Udvar station, Erno met with his Commander, Willie Isaacovitch, face-to-face.

Isaacovitch directed Erno to the nearest bunker and gave him the secret code for admission. This bunker was located beneath the hard ground of a junkyard littered with battered old cars and various types of metal junk. The bunker was hidden under a small, squat structure which served as an office for the junkyard. For four days Erno rested there, recovering from the shock of recent events. Hungarian Nazi police, meanwhile, alerted during a routine patrol by activity in the yard, had been keeping it under surveillance for several days, and on the fourth night of Erno's recuperation the police broke through the hidden entryway. Here, the Jews fought back with hand grenades and the solitary pistol in their arsenal. But defeat was inevitable, for the police were more heavily armed and backed up with reinforcements. The police took their revenge with bayonets, rifle blows and booted kicks. Later, the Nazis did not forget that these Jews had employed self-defense and they meted out additional punishment.

The group was taken to Margit Korut, an infamous hillside jail a short distance from town. There Erno was identified by his captors. Soon the connection regarding his

previous arrests and activities was made and Erno was brought to a white-tiled chamber designed for torture. Fastened to his fingertips, his toes, ears, nose and genitals, were electric wires, and by means of a manual generator, shocks were administered. The speed of the wheel's rotation determined the quantity and duration of electrical output and when a victim's response displeased the interrogator the wheel was manipulated to heighten or prolong the torture. Another favorite method of torture applied in Margit Korut was the carpenter's bench. The upper half of Erno's body was fastened to one section of the bench, his lower body to the other, and by means of gears the two bench halves were driven apart, and the body was stretched. Again, if the victim's response did not satisfy the interrogator the gears turned and the body was stretched even more. The torturers employed a hard rubber stick which resembled a police nightstick, but this stick, a German favorite, had coils imbedded in it and the torturers delighted in beating their victims with it. In their determination to elicit plans and names from Erno, which despite all methods of torture he steadfastly denied knowledge of, they beat the inside of his right wrist with the rubber-wire stick until blood gushed from his opened veins. Then they beat other places on his body. For four weeks Erno was tortured at Margit Korut. They were determined to break him. But they never did.

December 1944. A small escort of police arrive to request immediate transfer of forty-five prisoners to another jail for further investigation and execution. As soon as the prisoners are assembled for departure Erno recognizes Bumi! Ferike! Eli Slomovich! his Habonim comrades, disguised as police, bearing official-looking documents.

The other underground fighters and bunker survivors, although unfamiliar with the true identities of the disguised police, observed the avenues and streets of Budapest through which they were being driven, and like a rush of cool breezes on a hot summer day, a subtle wave of renewed energy arose among them, for suddenly they understood this was a rescue operation. And they realized they were travelling not toward another jail but toward the Swedish Consulate, or Swedish Shielded House district.

Immediately upon arrival at the Consulate, they were welcomed by Swedish officials and staff. Here they were fed, took baths and received medical attention for their wounds.

During the nine weeks of hiding in the Consulate echoes of war resounding from the suburbs of Budapest shook the Swedish Shielded House. In the basement where the survivors lay, considerable anxiety interfered with recovery. In preparedness against Nazi capture of the building the Jews were issued false documents which identified them as Swedish citizens. And then, on January 18, 1945 the Russian army captured that section of Budapest. Erno and his fellow underground fighters and bunker survivors were liberated.

Liberation came to all of Hungary on April 4, 1945. Several months later Habonim sent Erno and two others on to Bucarest, Romania where, with the intervention of the International Red Cross, the Romanian government granted permission for Habonim to occupy a villa formerly belonging to a top Nazi politician who had fled the country. There, Habonim established a refuge and education center for survivors of the concentration camps and bunker survivors. Habonim called the villa a "kibbutz." In Palestine the kibbutz concept, a place of self-contained communal living, was established as the most logical and economically sound means of re-building shattered

lives, while at the same time, its members labored as a community to transform the barren Promised Land into a modern, thriving State. Groups of Partisan fighters coming out of the forests found their way to the villa and in their wild state banged on the doors and demanded entry. They, too, were given refuge. The refugees arrived alone, destitute and homeless, and it was the goal of the Haborim leaders, dedicated young people like Erno Pal, to prepare them for immigration to Palestine: return to the Jewish homeland, the only place on Earth that wanted them.



**SARA & ERNEST**

## Bride and Groom

"Chocolate! Where did you get it from?"

"Shh!" Erno had brought the treasure directly to Sara. Wherever Sara went he was there, too, always ready to go for a walk, or just content to be near her.

Late one afternoon, when Sara hadn't seen him all day she asked his friend, "Where is Erno?"

"Oh, didn't you know? Erno is in bed!"

Immediately, Sara went to him. "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"No, I'm not sick! Chaim left today. He was ready to make Aliyah, and how could he go to Palestine in those rags? he was so ashamed of his clothes, so I gave him mine...my underwear, my pants, shirt, my shoes...now I have nothing to wear, so until some clothes turn up I can't get out of bed."

A few days later cousin Sarah came to visit Sara in her little room, and they sat together cross-legged on the narrow cot.

"You know he loves you, Sara...you must know it. And he's the greatest guy...and the way I see it you're constantly with him, you must care for him, too. Wake up already, Sara! And pay attention to what I'm telling you!"

The Red Cross had called on Erno for assistance in the gathering of hidden Jewish orphans whose parents, in desperation, had entrusted them to churches and Christian homes all over Europe for safekeeping. Erno refused to leave Bucarest without Sara, but Sara recognized the impropriety of travelling together unmarried.

During their long walks in the countryside, away from the group, Sara felt herself relaxing. She never spoke of Auschwitz or Stutthof or the ghetto. She spoke of her dreams; she began to look toward the future.

"What I want," she confided, "I want to go back to school. I want a profession."

"Sara, you can do all those things, I promise, I would never interfere, because I have plans, too. Everything was interrupted...we were interrupted...we're both going to do things, but we have to be together, and I will not make this trip if you don't come with me."

"I'm not going...it's just not right that a girl fifteen and a boy seventeen should travel unescorted together."

Sarah paid her cousin another visit. "Look, Sara, if you don't love him tell him now...and I'm gonna tell you something...if you don't marry him, even though I'm six years older than him, I'll marry him because he really is very special. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

The next evening Erno came to Sara with a beautiful five-point diamond ring. Sara didn't ask from where. "Marry me, Sara."

And Sara decided she must love him...he's so good...to her...to everyone...so she agreed.

July 13, 1945. No Rabbi. No mothers. No fathers. No grandparents. Everyone on the kibbutz felt the bleakness and loneliness which the future held if they failed to create

new families. Meanwhile, they tried to be family to one another. A few people went to a farmer's market in town and came back with fresh flowers. Cousin Sarah and Eva went with a few other girls and bought special foods: a small package of nuts, a box of delicate pastries, a bottle of wine. And the bride and groom wore white shirts and blue shorts, the "official" uniform of the kibbutz. Zvei officiated at the ceremony.

A sweet, brief smile softened the seriousness of Erno's face, while Sara's face reflected a mournful emptiness. The wedding seemed unreal as she looked at the young survivors who were trying to make this day festive. Visions of all her lost loved ones collided in Sara's mind: Chopping walnuts and apples for strudel...the safe familiarity of Grandmother Rivka's kitchen..."My child I have taught you"...Sixty pounds now I'm up to eighty...To the left she saw them go...Naked women digging...This can't be me...that Sara's dead...this can't be me...

Early the next morning Sara and Erno departed Bucarest, destined for Hungary. Farewells had been said the night before, everyone was off to their jobs. Some went outside the gates to earn money by shining shoes or gardening and others were at their jobs inside the kibbutz, in the laundry or the kitchen or sewing. Sara wore a black and white tweed culotte of hand-woven Romanian cloth. There had been just enough fabric for three culottes so the girls shared them and today, on the occasion of her departure, a culotte went to Sara. Sara tied a piece of rope around the waist to hold the culotte in place, and the heavy material drooped uncomfortably against her legs as she walked. She wore a man's white shirt, a pair of high shoes a size and a half too large. They flopped painfully against her injured toes. Over her outfit she wore a man's trench coat. Erno wore grey striped pants, given to him by another fellow, and Sara tried to mend the tattered cuffs. His shirt was of a heavy knitted fabric not quite a sweater. Erno carried Sara's Red Cross blanket and Sara carried their belongings tied up in a scarf: two pairs of extra socks, a square comb with narrow teeth on one side and wide teeth on the other, one extra pair of underwear apiece, one pair of torn grey wool gloves. They walked to the train station.

The mission: Assume care of forty-five orphans ranging in age from two to five years, kids who toward the end of the war had been pulled off the streets and brought to an abandoned apartment in a once-regal building on King Street in Budapest. For three months Sara and Erno accepted parental responsibility for this group of orphans.

One of the innumerable consequences of concentration camp existence was an obsession with cleanliness. This obsession manifested itself in daily baths for each of the forty-five children, despite the obstacle of a meager water supply which dictated bathing the children in groups of four. The younger ones were bathed first, and all the children had to be bathed in the same tub of water. This chore they accomplished despite the poor state of Sara's health. She suffered from dizziness, fever, an aching back and a host of other symptoms. But still she felt overwhelming sympathy for these orphaned, displaced little ones who'd been uprooted and transferred so frequently from place to place they didn't even know their own names. Some had been entrusted as babies under the most anguished, desperate circumstances to the care of overworked farmer's wives or Sisters with plenty of other troubles. Sara and Erno felt certain that the children had suffered neglect and deprivation, for these children did not speak, and so she ignored her own pain and weakness and tended to the needs of the orphans.

Erno brought home bread and sacks of vegetables obtained through the Joint

Distribution Committee, and together they cooked huge pots of vegetable soup to feed the children, the youngest ones first. United States "Care" packages provided additional necessities like cereal and powdered milk.

After the passage of three months a group of nurses arrived from Palestine to accompany the children on the long journey back to Palestine. The journey took them through Rome, Genoa and Milano where, with the cooperation of the Italian government, camps had been established to care for them while final travel arrangements, such as the preparation of false documents, were made. From Italy the children were brought to Cyprus, and from Cyprus they had to be smuggled past the British into Palestine. Aliya Bet, illegal immigration, was the Zionist response to the British "White Paper" which threatened Jewish survival by restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine to 15,000 refugees a year. To avoid being detected by a British marine patrol, who would send the children back to Europe, or to a detention camp on Cyprus, the crossing was planned for a moonless night. Finally, dark clouds filled the sky, the moon vanished and the ancient fishing boat creaked while the nurses brought the children on board. From the beach in Haifa the orphans were transferred to a kibbutz, where young adult survivors embraced them and kissed them, anointed the children's heads with their tears, adopted them and made of them, families.

## Italy

Sara and Erno continued to fulfill Erno's mission of gathering orphans throughout Hungary and Poland until his assignments brought them to a kibbutz in Italy. There, Sara was overcome by tuberculosis and other ailments, and a succession of doctors failed to heal her. She underwent various treatments and diets consisting of liver, pork and milk. Sara and Erno were sent to live in Castel deNova, a suburb of Rome, a beautiful place where the Pope's summer home was located and where the air was reputed to be the purest in the world. But even here, living with Erno in a little apartment, Sara's symptoms did not diminish. She was sent to Carlo Forlanini, a sanitarium in Rome, a government hospital where beds paid for by Jewish organizations were set aside for survivors. It was in Carlo Forlanini that Sara met a brother of Zvei, a sixteen-year-old concentration camp survivor. Zvei had arranged for his brother's care.

One peaceful afternoon Zvei's brother went out for a stroll in the sunshine, caught a cold from which he lacked the strength to recover, and he died.

After some months passed and it became apparent that Sara was still quite ill, the doctors recommended a new sanitarium in Murano, near the Swiss border, high in the alps. Erno accompanied Sara on the trip, several hours north by train. The sanitarium was an immaculate, restored castle. It was staffed by devoted doctors and nurses, and supported by UNRA, a non-Jewish organization dedicated to the care of Holocaust survivors. Here, Sara was fed intravenously, administered doses of insulin to stimulate her appetite, in addition to injections of penicillin, the new wonder drug, needles were inserted into her lungs to withdraw fluid. And still Sara continued losing weight and coughing blood.

Within the beauty and serenity of the castle sanitarium Sara met Bruno, a Spanish Jew from Salonica, whose lungs had been irreparably damaged by the lethal gases of the crematoria. He suffered also from tuberculosis and various ailments which afflicted survivors: a broken bone improperly healed, headaches, internal organ damage. The list was lengthy for each survivor, and all suffered from deep emotional wounds. Bruno was seventeen when the Germans captured him and forced him to work in the crematoria – it had been his task to toss the bodies into the ovens. He talked ceaselessly about the ovens – how they operated day and night, how the Nazis went crazy when an oven malfunctioned, hampering their obsession with quotas. He talked about his family – they had survived the Spanish inquisition by becoming "Moranos," Jews who converted to Christianity, until after the passage of two-hundred years they rediscovered their true identity and returned to Judaism. Now, all his family were dead, even an uncle who'd suffered alongside him, working in the crematoria until they burned him, too.

"The whole world knew!" he raved in a ruined, despairing voice, "but did they do anything to stop the slaughter of the Jewish people? They were dropping bombs all over the place, but did they bomb the tracks leading to the camps? They had spies and secret missions and everything! They could've captured those Nazi bastards at the camps any time they wanted! They could've done lots of things! America! Where was

America? Everyone kept praying for Roosevelt!"

Sara invoked the name of God and Bruno laughed in scorn.

"How can you believe in God? That's the trouble with Jews! They believe too much in God! In people! And look what happened! And what difference does it make even if I get well...the whole world is rotten anyway! So wherever I go doesn't mean anything!"

Bruno suffered his bitter agonies for four more months and then, one morning, in the midst of a bloody coughing spasm, Bruno collapsed and died.

"Let's get you outta here." Erno said, "it's not doing you any good here." And he went to the administrative offices to inform the supervisor.

"You can't just take her out," the doctor protested, unaware that he was speaking to Sara's husband, for admittance into the sanitarium required that patients be unmarried and totally alone. "She's a very sick girl. She'll die if she leaves," the doctor warned.

"If you can't do anything for her then I'm taking her out...I'm taking her to the beach!"

"Look," the doctor argued, "you are so young, you went through so much. She's not going to make it, there's just no hope for her. Why don't you just go and carry on with your life?"

The doctor's argument angered Erno and he raised his voice, "You don't understand! Sara's my wife! I love her! and I'll take care of her!"

"Then there's something else I have to tell you...she will never have children. They gave her "broom" in the camps, before menstruation, before she developed, and that, with the under-nourishment...well she's not allowed to have children even if she could."

"I love her, I love children, and there are plenty of orphans around. If we can't have our own we'll adopt. Sign her out, I'm taking her back with me."

They were about to board the train departing Murano when Sara stepped away from the wheelchair and turned to Erno. "What I'm in the mood for is an Italian roll."

"What?"

"Yes! I'm hungry!"

Erno quickly returned with a warm, fresh roll and Sara devoured it.

Tricaza, on the Mediterranean coast near Rome. Fishing village, resort town, golden Italian sunshine, salty sea air. They went to Tricaza to live with other refugees in a safe-house which here, too, they called a kibbutz, in preparation for eventual emigration to Palestine.

The four teeth Sara lost in Auschwitz after receiving a blow to the head and falling against a boulder, were replaced in Italy. Also, dead tissue was surgically removed from her injured feet. Her hair grew in at last, full and healthy as it had been long ago in Krive. Her body filled out. When Sara went out for a walk now the Italian men called after her, "*Que Bella! Que Bella!*" and Sara turned, startled, looking for her mother.

One night Erno came home with a bathing suit for Sara in a shade of pale pink, which blended with her lightly freckled complexion. Laced on both sides and in the center, the bathing suit revealed Sara's lovely, graceful form. Now when she walked along the beach every head turned in admiration for the girl whose chestnut hair

cascaded in golden shimmers all the way to her waist.

Sara imagined she must look indecent, so she complained to Erno, "How can you buy me a suit like this? Everyone is looking! This is terrible...and I'm not wearing it anymore!"

"Don't you know why they're looking?" Erno smiled. "You look gorgeous!"

Eh...Sara decided, he loves me...what he went through with me, now he thinks I'm beautiful.

They had been three months in Tricaza when Sara decided to swim, and discovered she could swim easily. So she got into the habit of swimming out to the fishing boats every morning, and swimming back with a fresh fish, delighted and amazed at her new accomplishment.

Against all medical knowledge and the doctors' warnings, her husband had taken her to the sea. The sea, and his love, healed Sara.

## Aliyah

1947. Through the organizations for which he worked Erno arranged for their passage to Palestine. They travelled Aliyah Bet, as brother and sister, with documents stating they had been visiting Europe as citizens of Palestine when war broke out, causing them to become separated from their parents. The seas were rough, and a man Ernest suspected of being a secret agent kept a watchful eye on them throughout the voyage. When they arrived at the Port of Haifa Sara rested on a bench. As she witnessed the excitement all around, Sara felt detached from everything. After a while she began to feel an inner stirring. Here she was in the Jewish homeland; nothing was going to bring back her life in Krive. Here, in Palestine, a sense of renewal and hope were felt by all who survived to see this day.

Eager to grow in numbers and strength, the various kibbutzim sent representatives to welcome the new young arrivals. Each representative distributed leaflets describing his kibbutz. Ernest presented some leaflets to Sara.

“So, which kibbutz do you want to go to?”

“Who told you I want to go to a kibbutz?”

“What do you mean?” Ernest suddenly realized they had never actually discussed it, he’d just assumed they would go to a kibbutz.

“I can’t live a regimented life, reporting to others, living all together. I can’t live like that,” Sara insisted. “If I still have some life left I want to see what I can do, I want to be independent! I want to know what freedom feels like!”

“Suppose I want to go? Would you object if I go by myself?”

“If you want to go I’ll come and visit you on weekends, like you came and visited me all the time.”

“That’s silly, Sara,” Ernest surrendered. “We went through so much together, do you really think I’d leave you and go to a kibbutz?”

So Sara and Ernest lived temporarily in a tent at Camp Olim in Haifa, a camp for new arrivals, most of whom were survivors. Government officials in Palestine were well-acquainted with Ernest’s reputation and knew of his arrival. Within a few hours he received notification to report to Hagannah where he was issued the rank of Sergeant Major.

On their second evening in Israel Sara and Ernest sat on the ground outside their tent. Ernest wore the uniform of the Israeli Defense Force and Sara wore shorts and a white blouse.

“So much to be done,” Ernest said. “We all have to be involved to build up the State.” When Ernest spoke, his passionate belief in the Zionist dream infused his words with light, and even though it seemed like an overwhelming task, surrounded as they were by tents and clotheslines, drifting aromas from hundreds of cooking pots, diverse European dialects, anyone who overheard him felt the dream would be fulfilled. “And besides all that,” Ernest said, “we have Arabs to watch out for. We must be able to fight if we have to and unfortunately, we now have information they’re planning an attack.”

Sara didn’t share Ernest’s passion. She lacked a desire for any kind of struggle



beyond meeting the needs of the day. She did know in some other part of her mind that Ernest was right. The time for fulfillment of the Zionist dream was now.

"They were showing me around today. Would you believe, Sara, we have a munitions factory here, in Haifa? Hidden, naturally."

During his brief pause an idea came to Sara. "Ernest! I have a terrific skill! I know how to make grenades and bullets!"

"You do?"

"Yes! I never told you. They had me making, in the camps, grenades and bullets."

"You did this?"

Sara nodded, remembering the dangerous work. Was it before she saw her mother digging? No, it had to be later. Maybe after the farm? "We tried to sabotage, naturally, every chance, and every day they picked out three or four girls and shot them."

The very next morning Ernest drove Sara in a closed jeep to the secret munitions factory located in a small suburb between Haifa and Acco. The route took them past Arab villages, where men armed with guns and stones lay in wait for Jewish targets. About forty concentration camp survivors worked in the munitions factory. Where before they had tried in every way to sabotage the production, now they labored with care; a faulty bullet could result in the death of your own neighbor or loved one. Sara felt no fear. She was grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution.

## Hope

May 14, 1948. Sara and Ernest are under the covers in their room on Hertzl Street; this is their home until their apartment under construction on the outskirts of Haifa are completed. His one pair of underwear has been washed and laid to dry across the radiator. The broadcast of the United Nations' vote on Israeli statehood is crackling from the radio on the bureau, in unison with every other radio in every home and in every place where people gather in Israel. Russia is about to cast the last and deciding vote. Sara and Ernest lean forward and hold their breath. Russia casts its vote. Statehood is declared.

Every light is switched on! Everyone is screaming! Sara and Ernest throw on their clothes and run down the stairway out to the street where already people are dancing the hora and singing "Hativka." Everyone is embracing and weeping.

Sara cries, too. As she whirls on Hertzl Street, caught up in a circle of celebration, Sara sees in her mind her mother, slim and blond, with glowing skin and coal black eyes which burn with love for her only daughter. Beautiful Bella. And at once the vision is utterly ruined, for it transforms into the other Bella; naked, digging her grave in the wretched mud of Auschwitz. Why? What had they done to Bella to transform the beautiful glow in her eyes into vacant holes of death? What torture had the demons reserved for one so kind, lovely and regal? Sara knows. Although she does not, for she cannot, speak of it to any living being, she knows. And in Sara's nightmares the unbidden memory of Bella's fate emerges to haunt and ruin all the nights of her life and all the future moments of joy.

Mengele had recognized Bella's beauty at once. From all the thousands who stumbled from the train just arrived from the Matihskow ghetto, he set her aside with three other women of rare beauty. The women had been led into a coarse room, hidden from the rest of the camp, its solitary window draped with a length of tattered velvet which formed a dark blot on the grim prison wall. The room was furnished with five rows of iron cots and a clouded mirror which, unable to contain all the brutality practiced before its silvered glass, had cracked into countless webs. The women were kept locked in the prison room for the satisfaction of the Nazis, whose desires were insatiable, until the very beauty the Nazis craved was destroyed, and souls the Nazis had refused to acknowledge were murdered, and the suffering remains of who the women had been were forced to dig their own graves.

The ground had trembled. Mothers, daughters, wives – shot though not positively killed -- buried alive, wounded and bleeding, in the Auschwitz ground. And Mother Earth had grieved, had sent her message in tears of blood and in ground that swayed in mourning, "This is not the purpose for which the Lord God created me!"

The celebration of Israel's statehood continued in the streets and on the kibbutzim throughout that starlit night. Later, the nighttime sky gave way to dawn, a crimson sky reminiscent of centuries of spilled Jewish blood. Everyone looked around to see what Jewish freedom and Jewish independence looked like in the light of a rising Israeli sun, which right before their eyes was changing, luminous, golden, a sphere of hope.

## **In Sara's Own Words**

We were living in Israel one year. Every three months I went to a lung specialist, and he says, Now you can go home and make a baby. Two months later I got pregnant. Dahlia was gorgeous. Born in July on our anniversary. They called her Miss Israel, a head of black hair, almond eyes, a tiny little nose, tiny little red mouth, round face. Miracle of miracles, after being told over and over I'd never have children. So I named her after my mother. I asked a doctor why four doctors were looking and looking at my baby. Because she's so beautiful we can't stop looking, she looks like she was already out in the sunshine. With Dahlia's birth I had a rebirth. Now there is a reason to live, a reason to do the right things.

When Stewart was born four years later they all said a little Ben Gurion was born. By that time Ernest Paul was very well known in Haifa and in all of Israel. He worked in Histadrut, went to evening school, became a newspaperman. Then he went to law school. When Stewart was born in Haifa they closed the post office, the telephone company, the dock, at the time of the Bris. My son's Bris was in a big Arabic tent that King Abdullah gave to the hospital, his wife had the same doctor and they gave this tent, needle-pointed. Minister of Transportation, Yossi Amogie in the Knesset, was my son's godfather. Ernest came with a car full of flowers and tears of happiness streamed down his face.

When Dahlia was twelve she wanted a dog or a baby. Stewart said, Me too, and Ernest also said, Me too. We talked about it, we all wanted another baby. Today my son Gil always jokes, Sure, you wanted a dog!

You have three children who are wonderful and you say, Thank God for that. But then you say, Where are all those other relatives who would have enjoyed seeing what I have. There are graduations with honors so you cry your heart out, there is no one to share it with you, and where are all those other ones, that have never lived to see this. I have seen my mother underground...

When I was pregnant with my daughter my grandmother came to see me in a dream, and this is the only dream I remember in forty-five years, and told me, You're going to have a daughter, and the next morning I was sure. When I had my daughter, miracle of miracles, I felt she is my mother.

I want my grandchildren to know there were relatives, lots of them, a very loving, outgoing family, everybody got married in the same city and if they moved away there wasn't a holiday that everybody didn't come home. And it was a fantastic feeling, everybody saw everybody and now, thank God for my little family. I look around the table again, I'm thanking God. And I see and I'm hearing voices and see so many people talking and laughing, I see the rest of them...the room gets larger and I see more people. And there is never enough people around me.

We came to the United States early 1950 with thirty dollars. Ernest had relatives, one of the cousins offered money. Ernest said, I don't want to owe, just God my soul. His cousin said, If you borrow some money you could start a business. So Ernest borrowed a hundred and fifty dollars and we paid him back in three months. The first

year we paid a hundred and fifty dollars in taxes, that we were proud of. For us this success was like a miracle. And I did appreciate every little thing that came my way.

Last year my husband felt he had to close a circle, go back to Czechoslovakia where he was born, one-half hour away from where I was born. For me to go back is like killing them again. Sometimes, to make it easier on myself I dream that everything there is just the way it was. I dream with open eyes. Open windows, lights, music playing, laughing. I see my girlfriends playing hopscotch. My mother is out of that picture. They didn't leave one Jewish home. They destroyed every Jewish home, so you can't come back and make a claim on a house.

When we came to my husband's house there were three new houses, a big iron gate. A woman on the other side said, Why you come back after forty years? What are you doing here? We bought all this. It doesn't belong to you anymore. I said to her, How dare you say you bought it? From whom? This belongs to my husband and his sister and his brothers. You have no right to be here. And I pushed her away. We opened the gate and walked in.

Then the other neighbors came, happy to see him after all these years. A young girl, she was five years old when they took the Jews away from my husband's town, she said there was never so much fighting as when they took the Jews away because they fought over dividing the fortunes, tearing from each other's hands.

My husband's father was the mayor of the city and they had a plaza with a fountain and his name had been on it. The name was gone, the synagogue was gone, everything was gone. A man came to see us and he said to Ernest, Do you remember me? I was your father's driver. We have nothing now, no soap, no toothpaste...from communism we live like two-hundred years ago. Your father used to give bottles of wine from his vineyards to everybody and since your father left we haven't had a decent bottle of wine.

My husband's father died in 1942. He went to Budapest looking for better medical help and he died there and they couldn't bring his body home. For fifty years we are looking for his grave. The sanitarium was destroyed and they built a big building over it. Finally, we found an old Jewish cemetery, they take out the files, the woman said there is another orthodox cemetery, gave directions. There they found his father's file. He died August 24, 1942. Buried Lot B. They took us to his plot, he was buried without a stone.

We called our children and told them we found their grandfather's grave. They started to cry. Buy the nicest stone you can find and take pictures. We fixed up the grave. Imagine, they wanted a picture of the grave. We wish he could know how he had such a family.

If you sleep it's worse than being up because when you're up you can think of things that are right now. Sleeping, your mind is just taken over and it's terrible. I always considered the bed not as a place to relax because bed was always the place where I wind up, again in the concentration camp, screaming to save the babies. I see the babies torn from their mothers' arms. Thank God for certain pills I take in the night. But I never have a rest. I can never remember in the morning what the dreams were. It's just an empty black nothing. But all night long while I'm sleeping I'm screaming. When my husband asks me, You had a rough night last night? I don't remember. And the children used to ask, Why does Mother scream all night?

One time my son Gil asked me, Don't you hate all the Germans, what they have done? So I said, Look, Honey, if I hated all the Germans I wouldn't be any better than the SS or Hitler. The ones who weren't even born yet, they are just people like other people.

We have friends in Brazil who are German and their daughter came and stayed with us for six months. My son Stuart had a book, what the Nazis did to twins and women, experiments, he gave it to her to read and she went around for three days with swollen eyes. I felt terrible, she had nothing to do with it.

My son said, "Mother, it's not going to hurt her to know."

And he told her stories.

She came to me, crying and hugging me. "Oh, Sara, what can I do for you now? I feel so terrible that my ancestors did such things!"

"You could work toward humanity, that it should not happen to no one, no human being, Jewish or gentile. If you're gonna be a good person, not be prejudiced, that's what you can do for me."

And she always says, "How can you look at us?"

"First of all," I answer her, "you weren't even born. Why do you feel you owe me something? Your ancestors, yes. That you feel terrible what they did, that's fine. Maybe if somebody feels like you do it will make things change in the future."

But it doesn't happen, really. Things still go on. Look what they are doing to people. And I think to myself, How in the world am I sitting still, knowing what is going on? And then I am angry when I think, no one did anything when it was my turn. We still haven't learned.

When I analyze my life as I often do, I have always lived with fear. Not for myself because I always felt, Dear God, I cannot have it worse than I already had it so whatever You dish out I'm able to take. But for future generations. Always fear. Every day everything reminds you of something in the camp.

Even when I have a party. I'm surrounded by family, I pick up my head and say, Dear God, not even one person who knows I'm the daughter of Bella and Shlomo. No one to say, Remember when she was a little girl. Except for Zvei, who worked for the Red Cross, that found me on the train, he didn't recognize me and then when I told him who I was he had tears in his eyes and he said, My God, what have they done to you? He took me off the train and sent me to Bucarest where I met my husband.

It's amazing that after so many years I start thinking about it and it becomes so real that the present disappears and I am in that hell again. With all the kids and the grandchildren and the accomplishments, the past overshadows everything else. All those visions are so clear, as if it happened yesterday. I see their faces, their expressions, their craziness, people already out of their minds. They are all together. The amazing thing is that I haven't lost my mind completely, I have survived. With all that darkness, all that pain, all those visions that I have been living with day and night, I have survived.

## **In Ernest's Own Words**

After Liberation Day, January 18, 1945, I was sent with a couple of others to Bucarest to establish a home, what we called a "kibbutz," on the way to Israel. The kibbutz had two functions. To receive partisans and survivors from the concentration camps. To teach Hebrew and to educate the people, particularly the youngsters, about Israel. Most were thirteen and younger. Thirty-five was elderly.

We were smuggling them into Romania. We had to create documentation and the Romanian government was not very cooperative. Mainly the needy and the helpless were treated by us and we had some of our people from our group, including myself, spend time on the border to receive people. We had people from Poland helping the people to get across from Germany, but it was a very complicated mission because we had to have trains and permits from the transportation authorities from the Polish and then the Czech and then the German and then of course the Romanian, to allow the train coming in to Bucarest. They were aware that these were Jews and they were not that sympathetic to the cause. We had to fight and negotiate for everything.

Eventually we housed over two-hundred people and the villa was comfortable for only twenty-five to thirty. We tried to keep it as civilized as possible even though it was a difficult thing to do. All day, morning to evening, all education and training was directed toward preparing youngsters for Aliyah to Israel. We tried to direct the people philosophically toward kibbutz living where it is a relatively easier beginning for newcomers with no professions. These youngsters from the concentration camps, their educations had been interrupted so some of their education was resumed on the kibbutz and we had teachers for language and basic elementary teaching.

A very close friend of mine, Zvei Present, was the leader of the kibbutz, the number-one person. The kibbutz was managed by a committee of five people, and I was one of the members of the committee. We knew each other well.

When Sara came in she was about sixty pounds or so, she was only skin and bone, her eyes were sunk deep in her head, no hair. Shortly after, I got friendly with her and then we started to give her the medical attention she needed. She started to recuperate. She was probably one of the most ill people, she was on the border of making it or not, it was a question of days. A group came in and she was walking a little ahead. At the top of the stairs was her cousin and as she came in she screamed, "Sarah!" and the other one screamed, "Sara!" and I thought both of them are crazy because I didn't realize both were named Sara. So it was a very emotional meeting, of course, the cousin broke down and she broke down and it was a very moving experience to see them be reunited and neither of them knew the other was alive. I was there helping her to walk up the steps and getting her to a room and naturally to a bed. And then a few months after that we were married. It didn't take too long because in those days you had basically nobody and you wanted to be with somebody.

Our objective was to get the people on a boat to Israel as fast as possible. And we put ourselves through a lot of pressure and responsibility to accomplish that. Those who were healthy, or somewhat healthy and were able to travel, they got turned around

in a matter of days.

The majority were looking to go somewhere, anywhere but home. Those who had any kind of Zionist influence in education, to them it was natural that that only place to go was Israel. We tried to explain in a seminar that this, the Holocaust, happened only once. But people didn't believe it, they were afraid it could happen again in another place and the only place they had a future where they could be safe was Israel.

Economically we were being supported by the Federation of Jewish Organizations, the Jewish Agency, United Jewish Agency of the United States and monies were coming in through Sweden and also some monies were allocated through the Red Cross. Our own people did the cooking, baking, and cleaning and everything that goes with maintaining a home like that.

People came back from concentration camp with nothing, without even clothes. Some had the same shirt on for weeks or months. So one of the first things we had to do was set up clothing for them. In the backyard we had a four-car garage and that was set up for weaving and knitting. We bought yarn and made fabrics and produced necessities like a pair of slacks, a shirt. We had some sewing machines and sometimes, some of us who were not leaving had to take our pants off until more pants were produced because we often had short notice of vessels and people had to be at the port and often they didn't have what to wear so we had to take off our clothes and give it to them.

This requires a lot of discipline because people, after suffering so much as they suffered, they were not very willing to accept any instruction or directions, from someone telling them, Take off your pants and give it to the next guy. It was very difficult.

We had a variety of people. Some were wild, particularly the partisans who came back after a couple of years in the woods, fighting. These were mostly Polish, they were not supposed to come, they found out through one of their friends about us. They came to the gate, found it closed and were ready to tear it down or kill the guard. We had to have certain limits, we couldn't bring in thousands of people. That was a very difficult element because of the way they were living, and they expected immediate help, and relief to change their life, and it was not available and they were fighting for food and we had quarrels with them. But most people who came back from concentration camps, they came in and created an atmosphere of relief, of being reborn. They had no demands. They were thankful for everything they got and they were willing to do for themselves, chip in physically, whether it was sewing or making shoes or fixing. We also worked, some of us, on the outside, in the city. We were shining shoes to get some income to feed the people.

We were fortunate, we had influential leaders in the Partisan movement. They were able to control their own, they were very respected. One leader was Antiq Zuckerman. Antiq was also a poet and he was known from before the war and in the Partisan movement he was a hero. An Israeli woman, also one of the leaders, Zvieka, and she was well respected. So while we had some wild and lost ones we had some very strong leaders.

The next phase, Aliyah to Israel, was very limited, and even when Truman was President it took time for Truman to allow or help, any kind of financial help which came later on mainly through UNRA, United Nations Relief Association. But it took time for

them to realize the magnitude of the human tragedy and that their help was needed. We couldn't get people on boats from Romania, so we started to move through Italy.

The Italian people were very warm and friendly to the Jewish people and were willing and offering as much help as they could. They were in bad shape themselves, but they were willing to share with the Jews. So we established homes in different parts of Italy.

Sara was very ill in Italy, going to different sanitariums, and I was very involved in working and visiting Sara. It was very hard to get papers to go to Israel because thousands of people wanted to go and there was a British mandate, only so many could go, you had to have an affidavit to guarantee you had someone to stay with, and you would support yourself.

There were three kinds of papers: Olif, Bet and Gimmel. Olif was the official way. Bet was illegal, you just got on a boat and tried to get to Haifa or some other port and if you were caught they brought you to Cyprus. And there was Gimmel, children who they said were in Europe visiting relatives when the war broke out and they couldn't return. So our documents were falsified documents, created to show that we were orphans actually coming back home after the war. We were put on a regular passenger vessel, a combination freighter and passenger boat which took us to Haifa.

It was nine in the morning when we arrived. At five o'clock I was already on my post, automatically a member of Haganah. My dream was to go to a kibbutz but Sara had other ideas, so she won, as always.



## Sara

This is what my friend who lives in Israel has finally told me. As you know I cannot remember any of it.

My older brother Velvel, two years older than I, was hard of hearing. When he was a little boy someone threw a stone while he was playing, an accident. He was exceptionally smart, always head of the class, always inventing things. Even in math all the kids came to him for answers. But if he turned around and wasn't looking at you he didn't hear you.

Coming down from the train at Auschwitz he wanted to help my little brother because I, my mother, and the rest of the family were already off the train, separated, but waiting for them. My little brother, Nuchem, was two years younger than I.

The SS, the soldiers, and the dogs! Screaming! Raus! Raus! They didn't want anyone to go back and he couldn't hear. He helped my brother down. Meanwhile, they had guns and bayonets. They started stabbing him in the back. He didn't even have a chance to turn around because he didn't hear them. We were divided by soldiers' dogs on one side, but I was there, when they stabbed him on and on, the dogs were on him. The little brother wanted to save his brother and he jumped, to not let this happen, and he got it, too. They killed them right on the spot. By bayonets, by kicking and by letting the dogs on them. After they got done with them they were lying in front of the steps of the train so people couldn't go by, so they gave an order to just kick them under the train.

I don't remember it. My friend says my mother and grandparents who weren't divided yet, were screaming terrible. As far as she remembers I was not screaming. I was like a piece of salt from the salt mines. My grandparents and my mother were screaming and they got hit and pushed and hit and pushed.

The chaos was so terrible, she says, it was not only my mother and grandparents seeing. My grandfather went to help the boys so they pulled his beard and by his beard they yanked him away. So she says she can't understand how I can't remember all that. I can't.

So she started telling me little things. They were two gorgeous boys. In fact, she says, my whole family was a very beautiful family. For Europe, and in that time, we were all very tall. Even the kids, for their age, were slim and tall. When they saw my great-grandmother walking in the street they said, There goes the Major. She says there wasn't one unattractive person in the family. She says I looked more like my father. The two boys had beautiful skin, beautiful eyes, they were tall and they looked like my mother. And Velvel, even with the little handicap he had, when you talked to him face to face, he was so smart. People used to say, He's going to one day be the president of Czechoslovakia.

So she says she thought that if I didn't talk about them it must be because it's very painful and she didn't want to bring it up. And she says she thought maybe it's better for me not to know now if I didn't already know.

I said to her, If you are not telling me it dies with you. And I can't remember.

Maybe one day I will remember but right now I don't. And I told her, the time is getting shorter and shorter and you're the only human being who could give me some direction here.

I have a cousin who doesn't remember anything. She shut out a lot, too. She had seven sisters and brothers. Even my own husband, when I think how much he has spoken about the siblings he lost, it hasn't been much. My sister-in-law, she didn't. There were three brothers right here and their sister came from Israel and they talked together and I was with them. And I started thinking back, How much did they talk about the whole family? They haven't.

I have just a name here and there in passing, but I have no picture, never a description of anybody. Understand? It's bodies without faces. When it comes to cousins and neighbors I do remember where they lived, the houses, the streets. I remember the laughter, the hopscotch, the games, running to the river, swimming. I remember sled-riding down the hill, the laughter and calling and all that.

The only things I have not blocked out is foods that my mother made, my grandmother made, the baking, the cooking. Purim, for example, you made up a plate of whatever you baked, covered it up beautiful, and sent it to your neighbor. Your neighbor took it off your plate and replaced it with her goodies, whatever she made, and sent it back. And you went from family to family, it was such an exciting time. And the bearer, whoever took this, got a tip or something else in gifts, and it was so exciting you couldn't wait for Purim. No matter how much goodies you had of your own, you tasted everyone else's. We did have beautiful, happy times. I think even more so than we have today. Because today, any good moments you have, you put on the television, it clouds it. Then, it was pure, nothing spoiled it. Everybody was there for every holiday, every celebration. I remember now, the excitement. We felt so safe. Till we heard about Kristalnacht.

Oh, I remember, funny how I just remember this. Two neighbors had a big fight and lawyers were called in. And I was there, I knew who started the fight. The culprit, he put money in my pocket, and they called me to be a witness, and as little as I was, maybe five years old, I knew it was a bribe and when I was called in I said what I saw. When we walked out and he knew I wasn't to be bribed, I wasn't going to lie for him, he reached into my pocket and took it back.

When it came to Rosh Hashana everyone had to forgive each other. So those two people, they made up like nothing happened. It didn't matter how angry people were at each other. On Rosh Hashana you could see people even those who weren't angry, walking into each other's houses just in case they may have done something wrong. Most people were raised very religious. Religion was a very important part of your life.

My mother was a very sensitive woman, dreaming such dreams for me. I was eleven or twelve, she was dreaming I would marry someone very special, she was already talking about grandchildren, how she's gonna love them, she wants me to have many, and she's gonna come with gifts and play with them.

Every grandchild was special to my grandmother. She found beautiful things about each one. We were so sure that she loved us equally that nobody even competed. And how wise, they knew exactly what each child was capable of, and so only this they expected of us. So nobody felt less important. These were not people who

have gone to university. These people lived a difficult life, a daily difficult life, and how wise. Only now that I am old myself do I realize how much wisdom they had.

On Saturdays kids love to play outside but we looked forward to sit on the floor around my great-grandmother, for her to tell the Bible stories. And seldom was a second or even a third cousin missing. She was sitting on a little stool like a queen, always in black, and always rewarding us all. Dolls she made by herself, with button eyes and painted faces. My great-grandfather made little doll houses, sleds and skis that he made by hand. About thirty-five great-grandchildren. And they remembered each one's name and age. We felt very secure, that we would never be alone.

Funny, now since I learn about my brothers these things are coming back to me. And sitting here with you, you have been so understanding, to no one else could I talk like this. You understand what I'm telling you? In the night, in dreams and in nightmares, it is there, they are all there, crowding around me, but then in the day I don't remember. Now I am remembering in the day.

Women kept their hair very short, wore mostly scarves tied in back. Even with the scarves covering their heads they were beautiful women, very pretty. Usually, the scarves were a woolen kind of material, like challis, thin, always colorful, little flower prints, polka dots, and the scarves coordinating with whatever they wore.

I used to open my grandmothers' drawers, take out their scarves and make blouses. I had a fascination with scarves. I liked to change them into something else.

All grandmothers were very good at needlepoint, all kinds of complicated stitches, and how to knit. They made sweaters and a lot of things by hand. My grandmother could even spin. They sheared the sheep and made the wool and they taught me, too, to pull the wool. It was all white and they dyed it different colors. The big balls of wool were used for large items and whatever was left over we kids got. I had sweaters of many different colors, leftovers. Also, warm blankets were made for the babies when they were born. They got up early, five in the morning, to have time for everything. They made their own bread, jams, honey, candles, everything. All the grandmothers did these things.

The grandfathers were farmers. Cows, sheep. They farmed and also had a small store where they sold all sorts of things, whatever they had to sell. Most Jewish people in our town had little shops and farms. Apples, wheat, grapes, potatoes, corn. The farm plots were all over. The produce was also exported and local people were employed to make shipping boxes, to cut the wheat and make flour.

Rosci, a friend from our town with whom I've had conversations, a little older, she remembers she used to pass by our house, I was outside, we had a little closed-in patio in front. So on her way to school she used to stop and play with me when I was about two. She says I was such a beautiful little girl, always had a smile, she couldn't resist stopping and playing with me. So I hung on to everything she said. She remembered we had a cat and a dog. A black dog with white spots on his face and on his neck. The dog was outside with me. The cat, a reddish-brown, was always around me, on the patio. I cannot remember, even Rosci.

There were only three radios in the whole town. My uncle travelled a lot and one day he brought us a gramophone so we had a gramophone with three or four records, played only on Saturday nights, after the Sabbath, after dinner. They opened all the windows, put the gramophone close to the window so everyone could listen. A lot of

Yiddish songs they sang together, and a lot of books they read together, usually religious books, stories about the Bible.

The gentile farmers, when they came to buy goods in the store, paid with eggs, a chicken, potatoes, onions, carrots, in a sack. Days were filled with the tasks of living, to provide clothing and food. Wash accumulated for three weeks and then three days of washing, if you were lucky the weather was good. Or else you hung it all over the place and that was a job in itself. Even the soaps and candles we made. Everything had to be manufactured from start except the sugar, and white flour we imported.

Outdoors we had a summer kitchen, an extra building in the back where all those things were prepared. Like plum jelly, had to be cooked overnight. So all the neighbors came and helped. You had to wash the plums, open them and in huge copper pots on spits, over wood fires, using very long spoons to constantly mix because plums burn very easily.

Then they did a mixture of fruits: pears, apples, plums. Such an excitement, the kids came to taste and lick the spoons. Also, an activity done with family and then you divided it. Corn, too, the neighbors came and helped clean the corn, open it. Many things done together. Laughter and stories, different dishes prepared for different days. Everything was a party, done like a party.

When a child was born they began to put away things for her, needlepointed things, quilts. For certain pillows you used the whole feather, other times you had to take the sides off from the feather. For one evening every week we used to get together and sit around and do it, together, singing and joking and laughing. I was too young and maybe I wouldn't do it right. It was the togetherness, you never had to worry, what will happen if your mother gets sick. Even people who didn't have big families. There was always the feeling, Don't worry, there's always gonna be somebody to step in. the great-grandmothers knew each other for generations.

There used to be Hansa, the crazy, Hansa, the *meshugah*. She used to say, she's going to Bella, the beautiful. My mother used to heat water and put it in a tub, in the summer. And Hansa, the *meshugah*, didn't listen to anybody, but she listened to my mother. Whatever my mother told her to do. My mother told her to take off her clothes and then she sat her in the bathtub and with soap helped her wash her hair, wash herself, and from her own things brought clean clothes and dressed her and fed her. There were poor boys in our city who went to the Yeshiva, they used to eat every day in somebody else's house, there wasn't a day we didn't have three of those Yeshiva boys in our house. Another guy, a crazy guy, so my mother made other people take him in and feed him and dress him. Sander with the bender, he used to take funny materials and hang it on his head.

Friday night, from the Synagogue, there used to be travelers, they didn't have where to go. Our house was always open, my grandparents' house, my uncle's house. Everybody did for mankind. Charity was a most important part of being Jewish.

## Photos



Sara and Ernest - July 13, 1945  
Wedding Day  
Kibbutz Villa



Sara and Ernest - July 1995  
50th Wedding Anniversary  
New York City





Family Portrait, Anniversary Celebration



